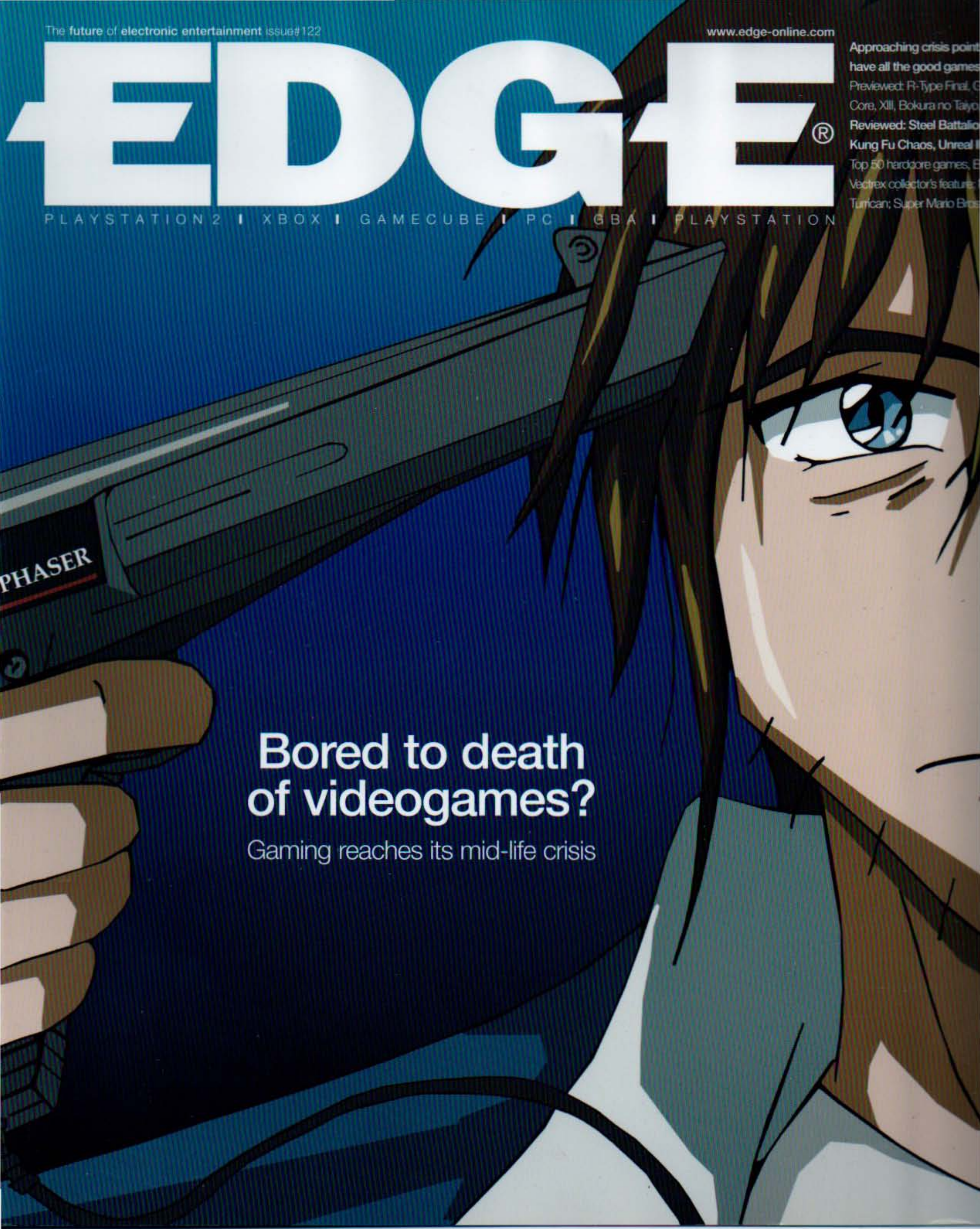


The future of electronic entertainment issue#122
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Approaching crisis point
have all the good games
Previewed: R-Type Final,
Core, XIII, Bokura no Taiyo
Reviewed: Steel Battalio
Kung Fu Chaos, Unreal I
Top 50 hardcore games,
Vectrex collector's feature
Turrican; Super Mario Bros
PHASER
Bored to death of videogames?
Gaming reaches its mid-life crisis





Zap. Remember? The way a new game experience used to regularly engage your senses, as though you had just been thrust into an entirely new and wonderful world? Seems like a lifetime ago.

Let's backtrack a little. March 1999, a post-PS2 announcement press conference at SCEI's HQ. **Edge** has just asked Teruhisa Tokunaka (then head of SCE) whether his company will take a more proactive stance regarding QA on forthcoming PS2 titles given the worrying amount of me-too software available for its previous console. The retort, that SCE isn't in a position to dictate what should constitute great gameplay, isn't surprising. What is unexpected is the discernible resentment demonstrated by the other journalists present in the room. You can almost hear them: "Why spoil such a beautiful day with your constant and unnecessarily pessimistic outlook, **Edge**?"

Well, because of the (utterly predictable) situation the gaming community now finds itself in, that's why. Because there's only so much generic Formula One driving, firstperson shooting, strategy devising, BMXing players are willing to indulge in. It was evident, even back in 1999, that the publishing model adopted by the industry's players was absurdly short-termist, stupefyingly blinkered in its outlook.

Publishers can obviously justify the games they choose to release, arguing that titles **Edge** supports – *Rez, Ico* and *Frequency*, to name but three – only matter to the magazine's audience of dedicated gamers. They dismiss those players disillusioned with current games perceiving the massmarket as there to fill-in the dent. The thing is, as some are only now realising, where the hardcore go, the softcore eventually follow.

Clearly it's a bigger issue involving pricing structures, retail stocking policies – even videogame publications (which continually champion the same type of titles). But if we don't work together to educate the masses and encourage them to sample new experiences we can forget about videogaming breaking out of this destructive cycle. (Relying on console online gaming is unrealistic given that it's not here yet – literally, as those expecting a report in this issue will notice.) Ultimately, '**Edge** titles' don't sell because they never get the marketing support they deserve, not because the massmarket won't like them.

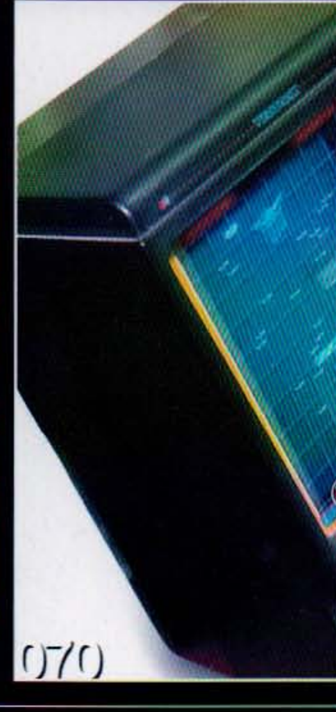


Features









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"You think you really know what's happening here, don't you? Well, I'll tell you something – you don't know shit, buddy."

frontend

News and views from e-entertainment's cutting edge



Nokia announces new games platform

N-Gage brain before launching

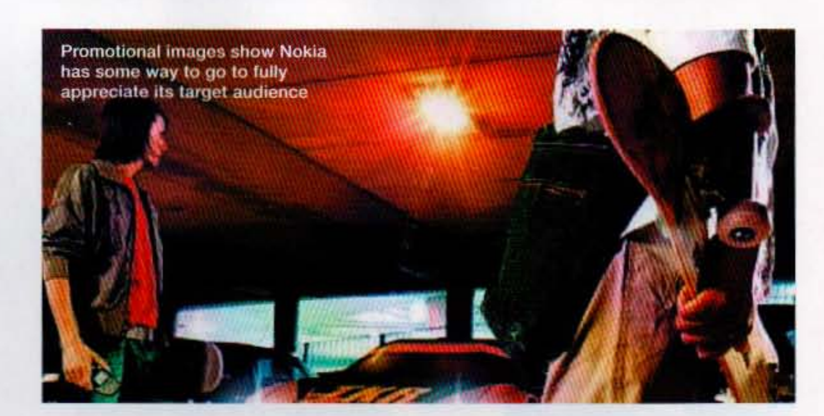
Wednesday, February 5, on a barge on the Thames moored by the London Eye, and 600 journalists from across Europe gather to witness the launch of Nokia's N-Gage. The new games platform – at least that's what the Finnish company is insistent that others refer to it as – will launch in time for the Christmas period this year, finally providing the Game Boy Advance with a serious rival. Or that's the theory, anyway.

In practice though, things are likely to be somewhat different. The announcement was followed by an impeccably organised playtest inside the huge Ferris wheel, but **Edge** didn't see anything there to persuade it that the N-Gage will be a serious rival to Nintendo's market-monopolising platform. The system, which uses Smart Media Cards for software and storage, is slightly smaller than the GBA, and lighter too, with a smaller, vertically oriented screen. The D-pad is useable, and while there are no shoulder buttons, there are an ultimately confusing number of Jaguar-style face buttons. That's because it's also a phone, except it's a games machine first, says Nokia, again and again.

Edge experienced three of the system's first games in an alpha state. *Tomb Raider* is a conversion of the Pocket PC version of the first game in the series, and the most technically impressive of the three titles, running at around (a workable, if not aesthetically delightful) 10-15 frames per second. Unfortunately the vertical orientation of the screen severely damages the experience, because the restricted field of vision makes it difficult to see passages to Lara's left and right, something of a problem in a game that's more-or-less all about exploration and 90-degree turns.

The other two games that **Edge** had a chance to play were *Kart Racer* and Sega's *Super Monkey Ball Jr. Monkey Ball*'s single-figure frame rate rendered it unplayable, and made Nokia's decision to show it off unfathomable, particularly as it's so easy to make a direct and unfavourable comparison between it and the GBA version. *Kart Racer* moved better but lacked any sense of speed and was essentially reminiscent of the leagues of awful *Mario Kart* clones that appeared in the mid- to late-'90s. Still, at least it showed off what Nokia hopes will be the main selling point of its platform: that it offers mobile online gaming.

Multiplayer *Kart Racer* was demonstrated via Bluetooth, which worked admirably; it will also be playable online. Games which don't offer native multiplayer features will also use the Internet in some form, although **Edge** can't really see the opportunity to participate in a *Tomb Raider* discussion forum (as alluded to by a representative from Eidos) as a big reason to revisit the seven-year-old adventure. Buying cheats for 2 (£1.40) may be more alluring to some gamers but, again, it doesn't strike **Edge** as the essence of online gaming.



Promotional images show Nokia has some way to go to fully appreciate its target audience

Publishers signed up to produce games for the system include Eidos, Activision, THQ, Taito and Sega. The last appears to be the one that Nokia is most proud of, running out a hostage-style video clip of Yuji Naka reading out an N-Gage endorsement as if at gunpoint. Without doubt, Sega's titles are interesting – *Sonic*, *Puyo Puyo*, *Virtua Tennis* and *Sega Rally* are all scheduled to make an appearance – but their presence is hardly a surprise, given that its rush to console polygamy has been akin to a starving man unleashed in a kitchen. Nokia will also be releasing the N-Gage SDK for free, a move which it says will "unleash innovation and creativity", but which cynics believe will lead to a plethora of unfinished, low-quality software. It's telling that the game in the press-shots is a generic isometric snowboarding game of the same type that's been proliferated on mobile devices before. It hardly instills faith that the N-Gage will provide, as Nokia's press conference implied, the next-level of entertainment.

"After the high-profile crash in valuation of the telecom sector, mobile gaming is seen as a crucial sector for network operators"

So how will Nokia persuade consumers that it does? The TV spot (chiselled European plays multiplayer games on his N-Gage, featuring stylised camera movement) offers no game footage, and is unlikely to tempt gamers or consumers who regard gaming as merely a bonus.

Competitive pricing may help, but predictably, it's apparently something of a forbidden topic at the moment. All the company would say was that it has to be priced along the lines of "any gaming device out there", but also that consumers would have to take into account that they are getting a phone, too. To spend half the press conference declaring the N-Gage isn't a phone and then to use the fact that it is as a caveat seems curious, and leads **Edge** to believe the price will be significantly higher than that of its main gaming rival.

In which case the success will depend on Nokia's publishing nous and its ability to persuade gamers that mobile online gaming offers an experience sufficiently developed over the GBA to warrant the extra cost. There is no doubt that Nokia is absolutely serious about this; it expects sales to be in the millions, and promises massively multiplayer games and online event gaming. But its last attempt at convergence – the ill-fated MP3 player – failed spectacularly, and the feeling among the gathering at the Ferris wheel was that Nokia doesn't know enough about the games industry to avoid that happening here, too. "*Snake* captured the imaginations of millions of people over the world," declared a slide at the event pre-empting those accusations. But that was a game on a phone; this is meant to be a device for gaming, and **Edge** isn't sure *Snake v3* is going to be enough.



Jack of all trades, master of none? There are several add-ons to enhance N-Gage's usability as a phone, but it almost needs to be taken apart to install new games

AOU disappoints again

Even compared to previous years, the annual coin-op exhibition managed to plumb new depths, offering little cheer to arcade aficionados

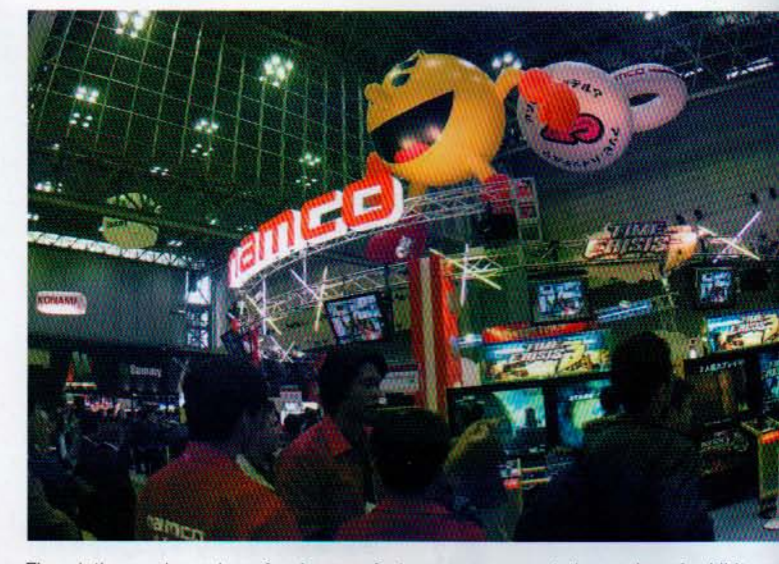




Konami's *RPM Red* (above, top) and Sammy's Atomiswave

In recent years, dispatches from the annual AOU coin-op exhibition have made for increasingly depressing reading – even more so than JAMMA, which takes place later in the year. This year is no exception, with the coin-op sector providing yet more evidence that it has reached a nadir of creativity and enthusiasm. It would be tempting to argue that things can surely only get better, but the coin-op sector has a depressing recent history of proving optimists wrong. Once again, Sega was expected to show some promising signs of an arcade resurgence, but even though it was undoubtedly the most dominant publisher at the show, it did little to mitigate a sector firmly rooted in the doldrums.

Indeed, the plight of the company's consumer software divisions seems to have started to encroach upon its traditionally strong coin-op presence. Though Sega-AM2 arrived with *Virtua Cop 3* there was again no sign of *OutRun 2*, though it is to be hoped that it will be unveiled at JAMMA. Meanwhile, Hitmaker's *Avalon no Kagi* (Avalon's Key) attracted a lot of attention and OverWorks revealed its very first title for the arcade, *Dragon Treasure*. By far the most notable appearance, and one of the few reasons for attending AOU was that of Amusement Vision, which was showing off the latest build of *F-Zero AC*, still scheduled for May.

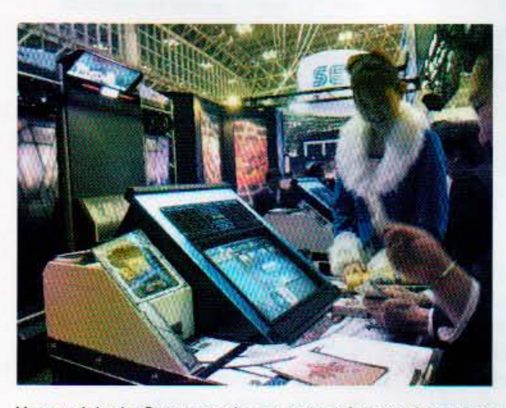


Though the usual round up of major manufacturers were present, the number of exhibitors was down, as was the amount of floorspace, reflecting the troubled fortunes of the sector

"There were two newer trends – a sizeable proportion of attendees from other Asian regions and a drive towards simpler games"

Graphically, the title impressed, although in terms of gameplay the version on display was far from complete. The cabinet also stood out, featuring a half-enclosed cockpit and a moving seat to simulate g-forces while turning (though this can be switched off for queasy pilots). It also includes a slot for a GameCube memory card and an IC Card reader. While the gameplay will presumably be much more polished come the game's commercial release, the AOU version was hampered by oversensitive handling. There was also no limit on the use of the turbo function. As it is located in the centre of the steering wheel, it requires constant contortions, particularly as another handle needs pulling specifically for special actions and jumps.

The combination of GameCube memory card and arcade IC storage card will ultimately allow players to import customised vehicles from the home consumer version, and save impressive results and performances. Meanwhile, passwords will enable rankings to be unlocked online.







Unsurprisingly, Sega was the most prominent coin-op manufacturer, with Hitmaker's *Avalon no Kagi* proving popular, but the trend was for low-cost cabinets this year





Taito's *Battle Gear 3* proved more popular at the show than Namco's *Time Crisis 3*















F-Zero was the main reason for attending AOU, but some work is needed on the handling before it's released in May



In terms of modes, standard races involve 30 vehicles, or networked play for up to four players, and there's a Time Attack option.

Aside from Sega and *F-Zero*, Namco focused on *Time Crisis 3*, though perhaps more significant was Capcom's decision to cancel the coin-op version of *Capcom Fighting All Stars* and reveal that its arcade division has been terminated – a telling sign of the times. Taito was having more success with the likes of *Battle Gear 3* and *Shikigami no Shiro 2*, though Konami's presence was once again muted, and characterised by its desire to emulate the networked play and storage card features made popular by Sega over the past couple of years. The best title at the company's stand remained *Winning Eleven 2003*. Also on display was *RPM Red*, a motor racing title using officially licenced Japanese GT cars and featuring up to eightplayer link-up.

In general though, there were fewer exhibitors than in previous years, and a smaller amount of floor space given over to exhibits – two trends that have characterised any coin-op show in recent years. However, there were a couple of notably newer trends as well; a sizeable proportion of attendees from other Asian regions, and a drive towards simpler games. The number of visitors from South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and even China is also a sign that arcade manufacturers may yet be able to take advantage of new markets, offering some hope for the future of the sector. And developments such as Sammy's Atomiswave board, based on a Dreamcast with a cartridge port instead of GD-ROM technology, offer arcade operators the opportunity to acquire low-cost units and easily switch games. Such a development may push the likes of Sammy and Playmore into the front rank of arcade competitors given that the likes of Triforce and Chihiro require a costly outlay.

Sega and Sammy surprise analysts with news of merger

But internal opposition to deal with pachinko manufacturer may pave the way for Electronic Arts or Microsoft to step in as white knight





The potential merger caught everyone by surprise, and it isn't yet clear as to what will happen to Sega's various development teams – some may even have to close their doors







The deal really could spell the end of the company that produced such gems as *NiGHTS* and the various *Sonic* titles

In an unexpected move Sega has announced that it is to merge with videogame publisher and pachinko manufacturer, Sammy, abandoning plans to continue its restructuring as an independent software publisher on its own. The move reflects the increasingly parlous financial state of the fallen hardware giant, but has also prompted speculation that the company may now be perceived as an attractive takeover target by several other big name publishers. Some indication of exactly how much of a surprise the announcement is the fact that leading Japanese videogame magazine 'Weekly Famitsu' even went so far as to dedicate a whole page explaining why it had not reported the merger in advance.

But the deal was made amidst a remarkable degree of secrecy, and announced on February 13 to just a select few representatives of the mainstream press. Sega's Hideki Sato and Sammy's Hajime Satomi invited this privileged band of journalists to a small room at the Tokyo Stock Exchange to officially announce the merger of the two companies, but they revealed little about the terms of the deal save to explain that a decision about the form of the integration would be made by late May or June. It was, however, revealed that Sammy President Satomi would head the new company, and though Sega's market value was comparable to that of Sammy when the announcement was made, Sammy is seen as financially stronger and the acquiring party.

While it's unclear whether the deal will take place through a holding company or an outright merger, the two men were expecting it to be completed by October 1, pending approval by shareholders who will vote in June, and went on to stress that the combined revenues of the two companies (¥385 billion, or £2 billion) would enable the new entity to leapfrog Konami, currently the largest independent publisher in Japan.

Financial woes

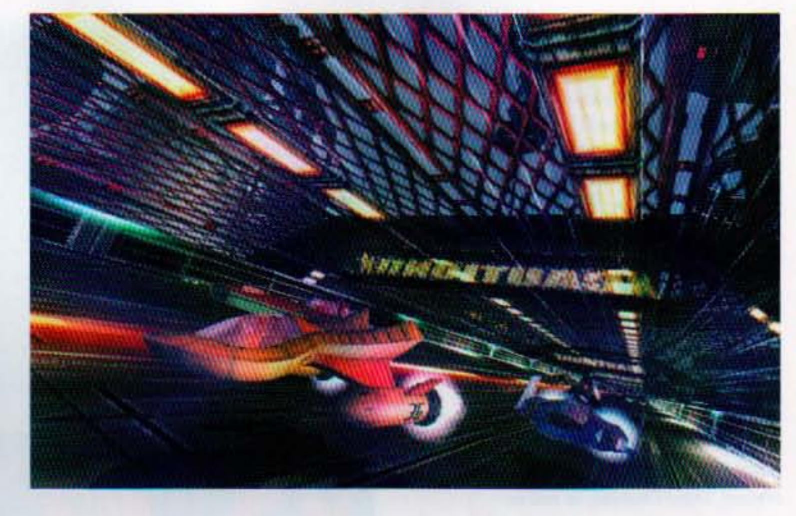
Part of the reason for all the secrecy is that, according to **Edge**'s sources, the announcement is the result of some considerable behind-the-scenes manoeuvring. It's been no secret that Sega's major shareholder CSK has wanted to sell its 22 per cent stake in Sega (held individually by Masahiro Aozono) for some time. It's also no secret that Sammy had previously made a bid for Sega while Isao Okawa was still alive, though this was rejected due to CSK's confidence in the then Sega head. But with Okawa-san's death, CSK revised its opinion of the wisdom of retaining its investment in the company; with Sega's situation deteriorating and poor results expected to be announced in March, there were fears that CSK's asset base would be detrimentally affected, with consequences for its own investors. Consequently, Aozono-san acted through Sega COO Sato Hideki to speedily find a new owner, consequently taking analysts by surprise.



This determination to get a deal done reflects the desperation of Sega's financial situation. Having made a net loss for the fifth year in succession last fiscal year, the company reduced its profit forecast for this year by 90 per cent shortly before the merger announcement, and is also expected to make a 20 per cent reduction in its US work force as **Edge** goes to press. Similarly there are rumours that some of the development divisions may be about to either close their doors or, at the very least, be forced to make redundancies.

The strategic advantages of the deal to Sammy are equally clear, however. Quite aside from the potential of the merged entity's intellectual properties, for Sammy the deal represents a relatively cheap way of expanding the basis of its revenues at a time when the pachinko and pachislo markets are shrinking, with many parlours









Clockwise from top: ***F-Zero AC***, ***Rez*** and ***Guilty Gear X***; it's clear where the development might lie between the two companies, though Sammy is financially the superior of the two

closing throughout Japan. It also allows the company to extend its geographic reach, taking advantage of Sega's global presence.

Nevertheless, after the announcement was made, the price of each company's stock nose-dived, reflecting considerable internal opposition to the arrangement, as well as concerns over the lack of detail regarding the terms of the deal. It also prompted speculation regarding the possibility of both Electronic Arts and Microsoft as possible suitors for all or part of Sega.

Though CSK was no doubt hoping for Sega's stock to rise after the merger announcement the markets responded negatively, with Sega's stock dropping to a new low of ¥675 (361p) on February 26, which will inevitably prompt resistance to the deal when it goes forward for shareholder approval.

But as talks with Sammy continue, rumours persisted that either Microsoft or Electronic Arts may attempt to acquire the company, and although these rumours have been officially denied, the negative impact of the merger announcement on the shares of Sega and Sammy may yet allow one or other to step in to acquire all or some of Sega's operations. Microsoft has been linked with Sega for some time now, since CSK asked Microsoft to buy Sega two years ago. That request was rejected by Richmond but reports have suggested that the company has recently been in talks with at least one US investment bank to look at the possibility of buying Sega – which would certainly make sense given the continued under-performance of the Xbox in Japan. EA meanwhile has been known to be gathering together resources for potential acquisitions in recent months – leading to speculation last month that even Nintendo could be a potential target.

In any case, with Sammy firmly in the running to acquire Sega and Electronic Arts and Microsoft rumoured to be so, there are a number of potential outcomes. The first, and best-case scenario is that Sega will use the interest from EA and Microsoft to obtain better terms. But if Sega isn't wholly acquired, it may even be broken up, either by a partial bid from EA which is only likely to be interested in those development arms that have worthwhile IP to offer, or from Microsoft, which is unlikely to have the same degree of interest in Sega's arcade arm that Sammy does. If it does mean the end of Sega it would be a great shame considering the turbulent times it has survived in recent years.

"If Sega isn't wholly acquired by Sammy, it may even be broken up, possibly by a partial bid from EA or from Microsoft"

And if Nintendo is forced out of the home console market next year, as some analysts are predicting, it may yet spell the end of the videogame ancien régime.

Gamehotel gets off to a good start

The first in a series of international events and conferences devoted to games and digital pop culture takes place in Paris

The first Gamehotel event, billed as a creative summit on games culture, took place in Paris in late January. Conceived by the innovative new-media label TNC network, Gamehotel brought together a vibrant selection of international participants to discuss and contextualise various aspects of gaming's cultural landscape. A small but enthusiastic audience of predominantly Gallic devotees braved the winter night to witness this intimate inaugural event, which was jointly-themed around Japanese rhythm games and new wireless games. Kiri Matsuura, co-designer of *Vib-Ribbon* and *PaRappa the Rapper*, headed the list of attending personalities, who were joined by **Edge**'s own Steven Poole and the editor of '1000 Game Heroes', David Choquet, as well as numerous other European and Japanese artists and developers. The all-too-busy *Rez*-creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi was unable to attend as planned, but instead left some telephone well-wishes.

Kiri Matsuura showed the beautiful *Mojibribon* in its latest incarnation, and provided a riveting insight into her sparkling approach to character design, with live sketching of her most popular characters; all of which, not surprisingly, won the hearts of an already converted crowd.

Also from Japan, but from outside the games industry, came Devilrobots: quirky designers devoted to creating simple and eccentric characters such as the Tofu Family, whose charming machinations grace everything from television advertising to action figures. Giant inflatable members of the family briefly took to the stage, cheerfully knocking over studio equipment in the name of surreal entertainment.

Wireless gaming was discussed by Tom Soderlund, co-founder of Swedish development studio It's Alive! which has quietly gained tens of thousands of players, sending over a million SMS messages per month in Russia. Thus apparently sidestepping the rewards (and complexities) of starting up in countries like the UK in favour of getting mobile phone network gaming up-and-running before introduction into competition-heavy territories.

A light-hearted game character contest ran throughout proceedings, with each speaker simply given three minutes in which to convince the audience that their chosen character deserved to win. Novel strategies were rewarded, such as Mathieu Castelli's physical *Ico* impression, or Steven Poole's well-received celebration of Solid Snake's bad hair. It mattered little who won (Kiri with *Mojibribon* as it happens) because the competition gave a brief but unique demonstration of humility to the participants; furthering the intended cause of the organisers to seriously reconsider gaming events on all levels.

Despite a few technical hiccups, the night proved engaging, with the diverse mix of French, English and Japanese speakers mingling comfortably with each other. This assembly of disparate luminaries – all with a commitment to an open-minded approach – was perhaps Gamehotel's most valuable and enduring achievement, creating a refreshing and exuberant study of contemporary games culture without needless academic jargon or an overtly commercial agenda. Even the near-barbaric lack of refreshments failed to dull a considerable vitality that the organisers of E3 and ECTS might look to emulate. For more information about future Gamehotel conferences, visit www.gamehotel.net/







Away from the commercial constraints of so many other events in the videogame calendar, the inaugural Gamehotel event offered some moments of rare cultural insight and a roster of interesting guests, including **Edge** columnist Steven Poole and Kiri Matsuura









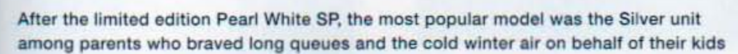
SP gets off to flying start in Japan

As European gamers await Nintendo's stylish new handheld, Japanese parents brave lengthy queues and winter weather to get their hands on one









After the limited edition Pearl White SP, the most popular model was the Silver unit among parents who braved long queues and the cold winter air on behalf of their kids







***Metroid Fusion* and *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* each profited from the surge of interest in all things Game Boy as the SP unit was launched, and sold out, in Tokyo**

Though it has yet to arrive here in the UK, the Japanese launch of Nintendo's Game Boy Advance SP went without a hitch. Which in some ways was a surprise. Though sales of the original Game Boy Advance reached new highs towards the end of 2002, the original launch of Nintendo's next-generation handheld was a disappointment. It failed to carry forward the momentum of the phenomenally successful Game Boy Color, and a complicated preorder system limited the amount of in-store buzz and undermined launch day sales. With the Game Boy Advance SP being released at a relatively steep (in terms of Japanese pricing at least) ¥12,500 (£70), there were initially doubts about the brand wisdom of offering such a barely differentiated (aesthetics aside) product, and preorders were relatively low.

Such doubts were swept aside come the morning of February 14 as sizeable queues began to form all over Tokyo. As usual, dedicated otaku slept in front of the main stores in Akihabara to make sure they would get hold of Nintendo's frontlit console, though the majority of more sensible shoppers only turned up a couple of hours before the stores opened, choosing not to brave the harsh winter weather. On average there were queues of 350 to 450 people scattered around Tokyo's gaming district, and most stores sold out of their allotted units in less than 45 minutes, with the major chains selling only through preorder schemes.

Metroid Fusion and *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* turned out to be the major software beneficiaries of the launch-day enthusiasm, while in terms of hardware popularity, the Silver model sold out first, followed by the Black and then Blue models – the Pearl White *Final Fantasy* unit, limited to just 50,000, having been sold within ten minutes of a preorder campaign earlier in the month.

Though Nintendo has recently unveiled a more edgy, adult, advertising campaign for the device in Europe, the Japanese launch was characterised by a strong interest from parents, buying the device for their kids who were at school – including several unfortunates **Edge** spoke to that hadn't been fully briefed about the price of the unit. And as the 500,000 units available at launch began to run out, panic started to rise, with desperate shoppers running from store to store in the increasingly futile hope of getting hold of one.

To put the success of the launch into context, it came a week after Sony had launched its own repackaged PlayStation2 in metallic hues of pink, silver and blue, but such a successful launch had not been seen since the original PS2 launch, and apparently took Nintendo by surprise, judging by the apology that the company issued to those unfortunate enough not to manage to buy a GBA SP at launch.

CUTTINGS



Primal gets its own gallery

SCEE has announced that London's Institute of Contemporary Arts is to host a display of artwork associated with PlayStation2 title *Primal* in advance of the game's launch on April 11. Aimed at inspiring anyone considering a career in the videogame industry, it will be entitled 'Primal Art', and will also feature a series of seminars dedicated to issues affecting the world of videogames. There'll even be the opportunity for members of the public to get their own work shown, with a work placement for the winner at SCEE Cambridge up for grabs – applications should be made via the official website, www.primal-art.com. The exhibition runs from April 6-9 in the ICA.

ELSPA convenes videogame summit

Publishing trade body, ELSPA is organising a conference aimed at addressing the continued structural problems that continue to afflict developers and publishers in spite of record growth last year. The conference will take place from June 17-18 at the Radisson SAS hotel in London's Portman Square. Among the issues to be discussed will be overcoming market instabilities, controlling production costs, addressing the realities of a hit driven market, and the future investment prospects of the sector. Speakers at the conference will include SCEE president, Chris Deering, Activision's Scott Dodkins, Game's Lisa Morgan, Screen Digest's Ben Keen, and Osborne Clark's Paul Gardner. Bookings received by April 26 will receive a £100 discount. Full details are available at www.elspa.com or by emailing stacey.sharpe@elspa.com

XSgameshow to host gaming finals

The UK finals of the World Cyber Games will this year be held at XSgameshow, a new videogame event aimed at consumers that will take place from July 25-27 at the Birmingham NEC. The finals are aimed at finding an official team to represent Great Britain at the World Finals, to be held later this year in South Korea, and there's a substantial prize fund of up to £50,000. More information about the XSgameshow can be found at the event website (www.XSgameshow.co.uk).

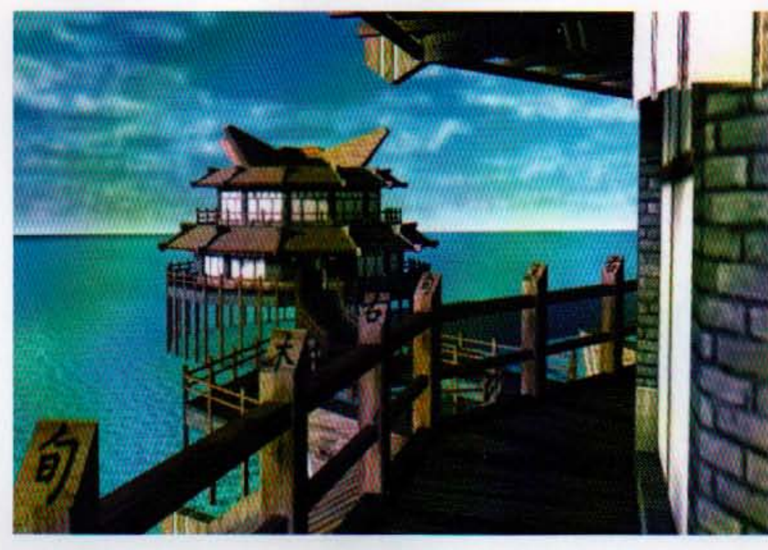
ICDC boosts graduate prospects

First batch of Digital Games graduates earn their industry spurs

As students across the country begin to apply for university courses, the first group of scholars to graduate from Liverpool's ICDC MA in Digital Games have demonstrated a remarkable degree of success in obtaining employment in the videogame industry. The International Centre for Digital Content is a partnership between the Learning Methods Unit and the School of Media, Critical and Creative Arts at Liverpool John Moores University and Mersey Television, and started its Digital Games course in 2000 to address the needs of videogame developers for trained staff.

The main emphasis of the one-year post-graduate course is on game art, character animation, game design, theory and production, and gives students first-hand experience of working on team projects. It's unusual in that there is also a significant emphasis on working away from the computer to develop design ideas – so it's not just about acquiring software skills – though the course is also dedicated to turning out graduates with workplace skills.

For anyone thinking of signing up to the course, students come from a variety of backgrounds, though the majority tend to come from disciplines such as fine art, architecture, set design, product design, illustration and textiles. Successful applicants will obviously need to demonstrate a genuine knowledge and enthusiasm for videogames.



The MA in Digital Games is headed by Simon Redman, but also features input from Matthew Southern, with whom regular **Edge** readers and GDCE attendees will be familiar

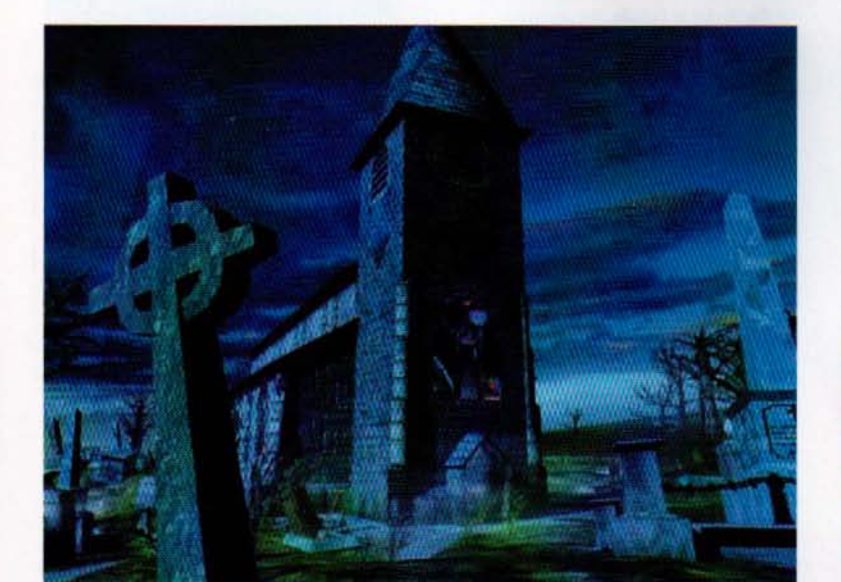




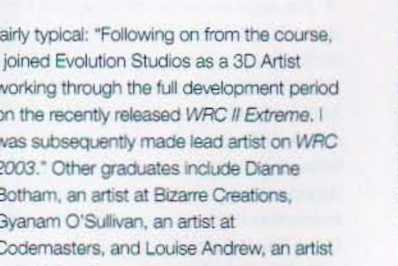
Perhaps the most important aspect of the course, which has been put together by Simon Redman is the success of the current crop of graduates, since many have gone on to immediate employment in the games industry as texture artists, 3D modellers and character animators.

The experience of **Simon O'Brien**, currently lead artist at Evolution Studios, is fairly typical: "Following on from the course, I joined Evolution Studios as a 3D Artist working through the full development period on the recently released *WRC II Extreme*. I was subsequently made lead artist on *WRC 2003*." Other graduates include Dianne Botham, an artist at Bizarre Creations, Gyanam O'Sullivan, an artist at Codemasters, and Louise Andrew, an artist at Acclaim. Summing up the strengths of the course, **Neil Massam** of Eutechnyx states, "The true value of the MA Digital Games course became apparent once I started working for Eutechnyx. Rather than spending a lengthy probationary period of in-house training, I was able to confidently start working for my team on live projects within a very short period of time."

More information can be found at www.icdc.org.uk/magames











The images on this page are just a selection of the artwork produced by some of the students on the ICDC's Digital Games course. Many have gone on to acquire coveted jobs in the industry

Dolby unveils new surround sound options

GDC education sessions just part of three-pronged attempt to enforce ubiquity of Dolby's audio standards

Following last issue's summary of the state of videogame audio, Dolby has marked the first few days of GDC with several announcements designed at making it easier for game developers to implement surround sound in their games – whatever the hardware platform. As well as sponsoring educational sessions at the event, the company has introduced a new programe to bring Dolby Digital 5.1 audio to PC developers, and has unveiled a new Pro Logic II software encoder.

The new SurCode software encoder is designed to increase the ease with which Pro Logic II technology is integrated into games. Created by Minnetonka Audio, it allows game developers to easily encode highly realistic ambience and surround sound effects in game software, and will soon be available for purchase as a standard Virtual Studio Technology (VST) plug-in and as a stand-alone software encoder for the PC.

The PC Game Developer Program, meanwhile aims to equip developers with the custom support, tools, and resources to allow the easy implementation of Dolby Digital 5.1. What's more, it's free, and will allow developers to take advantage of recent hardware developments, like the nVidia nForce2, and a pilot version of the program has supported the inclusion of Dolby Digital technology in several recent PC titles, such as *America's Army*, *Unreal Tournament 2003*, and *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*.

Finally, there were educational sessions at GDC given by **Jack Buser**, manager of game developer relations at Dolby, among others, who had this to say: "We have free surround sound solutions for every major game platform, and offer a variety of development options to suit the individual needs of game developers. There are over one hundred million home receivers sold that can decode Dolby Digital or Dolby Pro Logic II games, including some very affordable new home-cinema-in-a-box systems. Gamers have come to expect multichannel audio in games."

Expect a full GDC report next issue. For more information regarding Dolby in games, visit www.dolby.com/games






Dolby's mission to educate developers at the Game Developer's Conference has been enhanced by a number of other endeavours to make it easier for games to take advantage of the company's surround sound technology

Recently Reviewed

Edge brings you a rundown of last issue's review scores

Title	Platform	Publisher	Developer	Score
Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball	Xbox	Tecmo	In-house (Team Ninja)	8
Hajime No Ippo: The Fighting	GBA	ESP	Treasure	8
SimCity 4	PC	Electronic Arts	Maxis	7
Taiko No Tatsujin	PS2	Namco	In-house	7
The Mark of Kri	PS2	SCEE	SCEA	7
Phantasy Star Collection	GBA	THQ	Digital Eclipse	6
IGI2: Covert Strike	PC	Codemasters	Innerloop Studios	5
Impossible Creatures	PC	Microsoft	Relic Entertainment	5
Racing Evoluzione	Xbox	Infogrames	Milestone	5
Sega Rally Championship	GBA	Sega	Sega Rosso	5
LowRider: Round the World	PS2	Pacific Century	In-house	4
Primal	PS2	SCEE	In-house	4
Kakuto Chojin	Xbox	Microsoft	Dream Publishing	2


DoA Xtreme Beach Volleyball


Hajime No Ippo: The Fighting


Taiko No Tatsujin


The Mark of Kri

CUTTINGS

Nintendo plans marketing blitz

After a relatively quiet Christmas for the GameCube, Nintendo has made a series of announcements that will bring cheer to PAL gamers. First, the company has confirmed that *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* will ship on May 3 in Europe and a limited edition run will include the bonus disc containing *Ocarina of Time* and *Ocarina of Time Master Quest*. Second, the company is to unveil a Player's Choice budget range of titles on April 4, which will include the likes of *Pikmin* and *Luigi's Mansion* for a price of around 30 (£20). Third, *Metroid Prime* will launch on March 21 with a 5m (£3.4m) marketing campaign, featuring a sponsorship deal with MTV and a limited edition *Metroid* GameCube bundle that will sell for 199 (£135). And finally, the company has announced plans to release a Broadband adapter and Modem adapter at a cost of 50 (£35) to accompany the launch of *Phantasy Star Online Episode I & II*. The only bad news is that *PSO* will require a payment of £5.99 every 30 days to pay for the maintenance of servers.

Dave Mirra to sue Acclaim

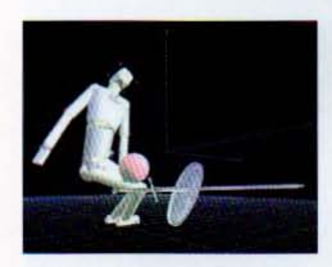
The saga of Acclaim's *BMX XXX* was given a bizarre twist recently when it was revealed that Dave Mirra is to sue the company, alleging that the publisher improperly used his name and image to promote the tawdry title. The BMX star is seeking $21m (£13m) in damages, claiming that the original concept did not involve the pornographic material that made it into the finished product. The news will no doubt compound Acclaim's misery after several major retailers refused to stock the title upon its release and gamers largely ignored the title.

Edge presents: Equip

Following the success of **Edge** presents: **Retro**, **Edge** is launching a new series of specials dedicated to the future of the major gaming hardware platforms. The first issue of **Edge** presents: **Equip** will be dedicated to Sony's PlayStation2 and goes on sale on March 28. This issue examines Sony's online strategy, the potential of EyeToy to transform the perception of videogames, and contains previews of forthcoming software available on the platform. It costs £5 and is available from all good newsagents.

Bringing skeletons to life

Cheaper than motion capture and more flexible than keyframing, Natural Motion's Endorphin offers a new approach to character animation



Another example of interaction with props is this knight, complete with shield and sword, who comes to grief thanks to a well-aimed cannon ball



In the 'fall' behaviour, the model will launch himself over the edge of a cliff and try to minimise its air resistance while falling to its certain virtual death



Endorphin ships with 40 character behaviours, which animators can modify by manually adding forces to any part of their models' skeletons, or hand-animate moves over the top

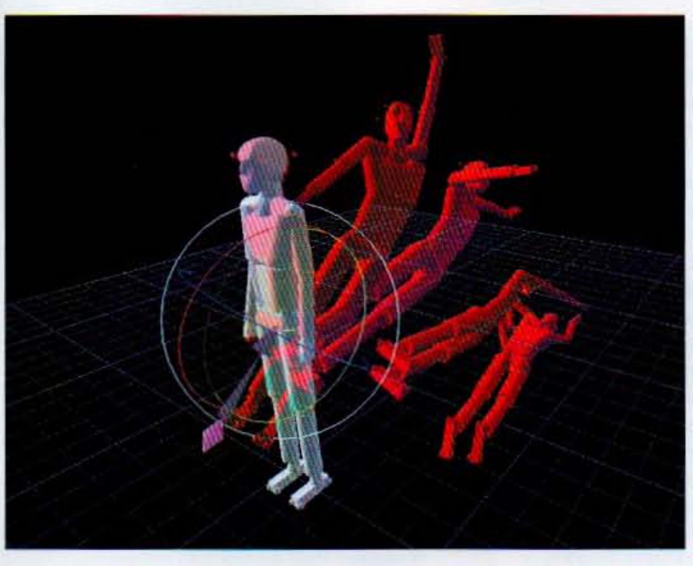
One of the biggest problems facing developers is getting the best balance between the cost of making a game and its visual quality. Because despite the growing importance of gameplay concepts such as AI and non-linearity, eye candy remains the key marketing talisman. Generally, the decision boils down to the number of artists a developer can afford to employ – the more you have, then the better and more varied a game's textures, models and animation will be. That's why the current theme for middleware companies is focusing on the productivity gains of their latest tools; because anything that costs less than extra artists but can increase the output of an existing team is seen as a winner.

While the likes of Havok and MathEngine are pushing the animation potential of their physics tools in terms of physically-modelled ragdoll characters, Oxford-based Natural Motion is taking this approach to another level. Launched at the recent Game Developers Conference, its Endorphin package mixes a highly accurate biomechanical model of human dynamics with what the company has labelled its 'Active Character Technology'. This is a set of specific artificial intelligences which allow characters to perform behaviours such as walking, falling off a cliff, being caught in an explosion or writhing around on the floor.

"This company knows a lot about human motion and biomechanical bodies, consisting of skeletons, muscles and joint limits, but the real 'mcguffing' we add is a stimulated brain for animation," explains **Geoff Shaw**, Natural Motion's product director. "The word we used to explain what it does is 'incarnation'. Using Endorphin, artists can take their dead ragdoll models and incarnate them."



Taken from a 'Titanic'-homage demo in which characters slip down the sinking ship's now vertical deck, Endorphin-animated characters can also interact realistically with their environments



One of the neat touches of Endorphin is the strobing visualisation tool so animators can see the effects of adding forces to a character. Natural Motion sees it as a very practical solution

This is exactly how Endorphin provides its productivity gains. Using a set of 40 inherent behaviours, which are shipped with the package, artists can create their very own custom animations by daisy-chaining the behaviours together in a whole range of different combinations. In addition, they are able to add impact forces at any time to any part of the model's skeleton. For example, an animation could begin with a walk cycle, which is blended into a run, while at a certain point in the run a large backward force hits the character's torso. In terms of the game story, this could represent the character being hit by a cannon ball. Once knocked to the floor, the 'writhe around' behaviour could then be triggered. The creation process is a good deal faster than the standard keyframing approach, which provides the productivity win. And Shaw believes that animators will be able to create hundreds of moves extremely quickly.

But while the technology has enormous potential – and not just within the games industry – Natural Motion is keen to ensure it works in a well-defined part of development before exposing more of its functionality. For that reason, Endorphin v1.0 is being marketed as Windows-based virtual motion capture package.

"If an animator knows what mocap is, they will know what Endorphin is," explains Shaw, who knows all about the technique himself from his previous job with optical motion capture vendor, Vicon. "We're not saying that Endorphin is going to revolutionise the way that animators work," he adds. "That may come but initially we want to fit in with developers' existing art pipeline and also be able to give them something new that builds on their existing skillset."

In this respect, one of Endorphin's advantages over mocap is that it generates pure data. Motion capture techniques suffer from the introduction of error signals into the motion they capture, and these require extra post-processing work to correct. But Endorphin animation is as clean as hand animation. The other main advantage that Endorphin has over mocap is more practical.

"I won't say we can do impossible animations because the motion we generate will always be physically modelled but we can do things such as whack our character's head with a baseball bat or pull his arms off," says Shaw, with a somewhat grisly grin. "Game developers have been particularly keen on those sort of animations. That's why we can say what we're offering is beyond motion capture. And that's what we're aiming to do with Endorphin – allow developers to do things out of the ordinary."

www.gamebryo.com

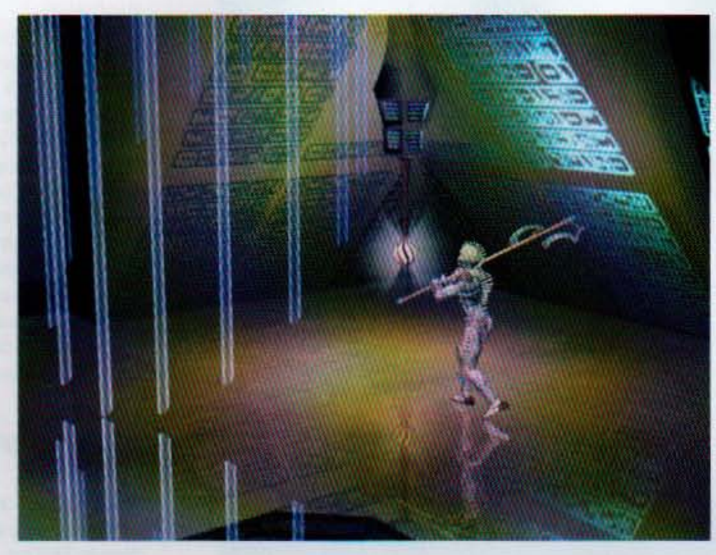
Hatching the new breed

Veteran graphics company NDL is looking to breathe new life into game development with its Gamebryo toolkit

There's little doubt the first war of middleware has been won. Criterion's RenderWare is by far and away the most popular licensed game development technology in the world. But while the company broadens and deepens its range, rolling out newer versions of RenderWare Platform and Studio, the battlefield is certainly not empty of healthy competitors.

Longest lived is Chapel Hill, North Carolina-based NDL, which is proving that an old dog *can* learn new tricks. It's been in the graphics space for 19 years and has a great reputation, particularly with respect to its PC technology and the flexibility provided by its art tools. It might be smaller than its Guildford-based challenger but it's had a successful 2002 as well, thanks to hit games such as *Freedom Force* and *Dark Age of Camelot*. "In any market, there are different ways to deliver products, make money, have fun, and be successful," explains CEO **John Austin**. "How you run your business is a function of a lot of things – your financial backing, your core skills, and your personal mindset and goals. Size isn't all that matters; both Microsoft and Red Hat are successful companies in their own right."

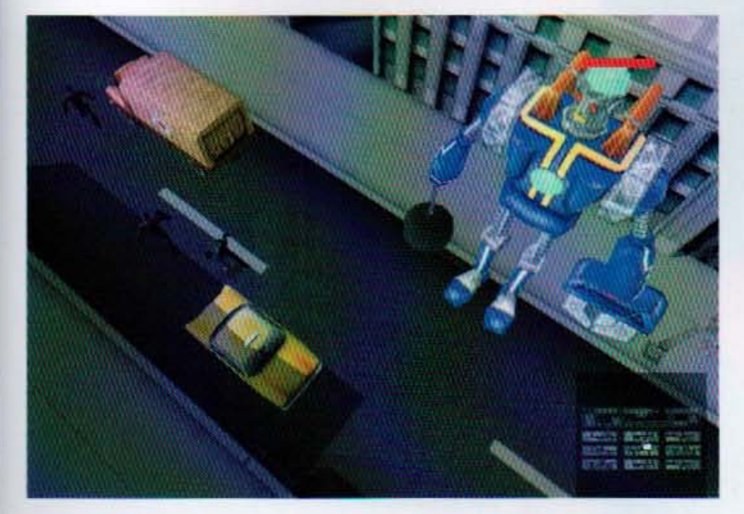
And 2003 is already shaping up to be a pretty good year for NDL. Not only has it unveiled its new technology, called Gamebryo, at the Game Developers' Conference, it's also embarked on a new marketing strategy, or as Austin corrects, "Now we actually have a marketing strategy."



A shiny reflective floor, sharp shadows and electric lighting are all in place for NDL's demo of its new Gamebryo graphics technology. The company plans to challenge Criterion's leadership

Previous versions of its technology traded under the tag NetImmerse for example, which was somewhat confusing as it never featured any online components. "There's an old joke about a company with such bland marketing that if it opened a sushi bar it would hang a sign out front saying, 'cold dead fish'," Austin continues. "I don't think we've been that bad, but we have focused most of our energy on the technology. As a result, not enough people have heard about our technology, people, and capabilities. All of the new features in Gamebryo take us well beyond what we've had with NetImmerse, so it seemed like a great time to come out with a new name and really communicate what we've got."

Interestingly, in contrast to the framework approach taken by the likes of Criterion, Gamebryo is what Austin refers to as a "pluggable tools architecture", specifically designed to allow developers to add their custom features to suit their particular style of game. One current buzzphrase well covered by this philosophy is 'vertex shaders', which provide artists with the ability to create high quality textures and material effects using simple scripts and slider-driven menus. As well as this, Gamebryo features animation and character tools to enable artists to more intuitively create motion and control large numbers of on-screen entities. The underlying technology has been given a performance boost, too. Austin claims it now offers a streamlined scene graph architecture, modular collision system, decreased load times and a smaller memory footprint. "Developers don't want a development environment structure imposed on them," he concludes. "With Gamebryo you build your game the way you want to." The battlelines for the second war are drawing up fast.



Irrational's *Freedom Force* (above) was one of a clutch of successful PC games powered by NDL's Gamebryo technology in 2002. Another example is Mythic's *Dark Age of Camelot*

Looking good online

Continuing NDL's great reputation for massively multiplayer online PC games (MMGs), the latest title to announce it's using the technology is Codemasters' *Dragon Empires*. "NDL's 3D graphics toolkit allows us to quickly and efficiently add new objects and graphical features into the game environment," reckons **Ted Carron**, *Dragon Empires'* producer. "Because of this, our development team has been able to spend more time creating a compelling environment." *Dragon Empires* presents a magically-driven fantasy world in which both human and dragon live. It's a clan-based with different orders aiming to take control of the 50 cities which make up the *Dragon Empires*. One of the key attributes of the game's engine is that it generates a full weather model, resulting in tropical rainstorms, lightning, thunder, wind and snow. NDL's technology also powers Mythic's *Dark Age of Camelot* series of MMGs. "The flexibility that is built into the Gamebryo tools, and the ability to plug it into our art pipeline, is why we plan on using it on future expansions and projects," agrees **Rob Denton**, Mythic's chief technology officer.





One forthcoming game using NDL's Gamebryo technology is Codemasters' ambitious and massively multiplayer *Dragon Empires*. Its full and dynamic weather system shows something of Gamebryo's enabling qualities

OUT THERE

REPORTAGE

01



One shot kill + Covenant transport = opportunity for mischief. Let's hope they make alien parachutes



Edge wants to see the Covenant's insurance claim for this little mishap. Their premium will rocket



02



Nintendo endeavours to add more ugly angles with another awkward add-on. Bring back the Lynx





Even smaller things to lose? Miniaturisation sucks. Edge wants a converter to let it use NES carts

01 Combat 3v01v3d

US: It's probably not what Bungie was thinking when it added the obligatory subtitle but, thanks to industrious Xbox hackers, the *Halo* combat experience really is evolving. **Edge** isn't talking abou XboxConnect, the PC routing software that allows multiplayer *Halo* across the Internet, but a homebrew *Halo* patch that does substantially more than just make the game playable – and yes, **Edge** is looking at you, *Unreal Championship*. The patch, which can only be applied if you've got a chipped Xbox, offers both invulnerability and infinite ammo, standard features which recall classic game trainers of yesteryear. Other additions are slightly more interesting; one shot kill lets you down Covenant transports with a single pistol shot, and Super Jump and Fall Guy allow you to reach previously inaccessible areas of the landscape. But it's the Bump Character option that's truly, truly amazing. Switch it on touch an enemy, and you'll possess their body – Marine, Jackal, Elite, whatever. Living life as a Covenant is cute enough, but driving a Wraith? Dreamy. Check the video here: http://halo.bungie.org/misc/hackinhalomirrors.html

02 Smart AM3 has the answer

Japan: Perhaps deciding that the SP is just too sleek and nice looking, even accounting for the chunky headphone adapter, tech designer AM3 has come up with a clunky add-on which blesses the GBA with Smart Media support. "Big deal," cry the cynics. "Well, uhm, maybe," responds **Edge**: SMC allows publishers to sidestep the often prohibitive nature of cartridges, and create more disposable content (comics, anime, and music, for example for the handheld. This is something that Gamepark's GP32 does very well; a factor which probably hurried the device's progress along a little – that, and the fact that Toshiba, a major stockholder in Nintendo, makes SMCs. Cards will support up to five hours of audio or 24 minutes of full-screen video footage, and the company hopes to provide 'download stations' for content in public places. The system will be shown off at E3, with distribution beginning in October. A European launch is planned for 2004.

Soundbytes

"I realise it was very stupid of me. I will not do it again… I had obviously turned off the sound."

Norwegian MP **Troud Helleland** comments to Reuters after being caught playing a wargame on his Pocket PC during a debate on Iraq

"My only real test drive came after I'd signed the papers. That was a lot of confidence in a computer game but I was pretty familiar with the Jeep technology."

A new owner of a $25,000 Jeep explains why he became one of 86 players to buy the Wrangler Rubicon after experiencing an online demo

"It's bizarre. We have to determine the veracity of the child's statement."

Police captain **Ron Van Nuys** of Trip, Ohio, on investigating claims from a six-year-old boy that his babysitter had locked him in a tumble dryer

Hudson's assets frozen

Japan: Just when you thought bomb-trick-pony Hudson was running out of places to port its favourite franchise, it goes and finds a new format. No, not the Xbox or N-Gage, but something far more internationally credible – Ice. The huge sculpture appeared at a snow festival in Japan over Christmas to mark the release of the ubiquitous franchise's latest iteration on PS2 and GameCube. Veterans of a thousand slippy-slidey ice worlds might fear that this frozen medium really isn't the best location for interactive entertainment, and while some kind of 'snowball chute game' was definitely on offer, **Edge** doesn't have any details on how it played. That said, it imagines the whole experience was probably something like *Dragon's Lair*, in that you spend a hell of a lot of time gazing at it in awe, a little bit longer wondering "why?" and then finally walking away glad you don't have it in your house.

King of Lighters '03

Japan: It's the pitch for the perfect Out There story: pranksters try *King of Fighters* Cosplay, with real fire and comical results, in Japan. Luckily for **Edge** it already exists, or it'd have to have jetted off to Tokyo and create it itself; and, tragically, the Out There budget for '03 disappeared on an ill-conceived wager involving a horse called Demis' Republic. Anyway, back to that story: **Edge** knew *King of Fighters* is the hardcore favourite, but this is probably taking things just a little too far: two dedicated actors throwing actual fireballs at each other, before physical pain brings one to the conclusion than Fire Is Not A Toy, prompting him to use his trump card finishing move of 'run panicking into the sea'. Is it any wonder SNK fans are such a dying breed when they begin trying things like this? See the video at:
www.tanteifile.com/baka/2003/01/28_01_yamaki3_03/index.html

Innovative, Unique, Exhilerating, Atari

UK: While the Atari brand continues to flounder under the combined weight of such titles as *Unreal II* and *Splashdown* (with the likes of *Neverwinter Nights* seemingly an exception), it looks set to benefit from a relative surfeit of quality in March thanks to the release of the Atari TV Games Video Game System. Modelled on the original Atari 2600 joystick, the device contains ten games (*Asteroids*, *Adventure*, *Missile Command*, *Centipede*, *Gravitar*, *Yar's Revenge*, *Breakout*, *Pong*, *Circus Atari* and *Real Sports Volleyball*) and though the games are all singleplayer only, at around £25 the device is about half the eBay price of the original Atari 2600 console.

Data Stream

Amount 'Playboy' readers spent on videogames in 2001: **$300m**

Percentage of voters on xboxsolution.com that think "the ladies of *DOA Xtreme Beach Volleyball* are hot!": **37.95**

Percentage of votes suggesting Xbox Website hwbb.com – run by none other than Hunkawanka Biggabuns – be closed down: **58.33**

Percentage of accidental, occupational injuries that involve the back, according to Labor Standard Bureau of Japan: **60**

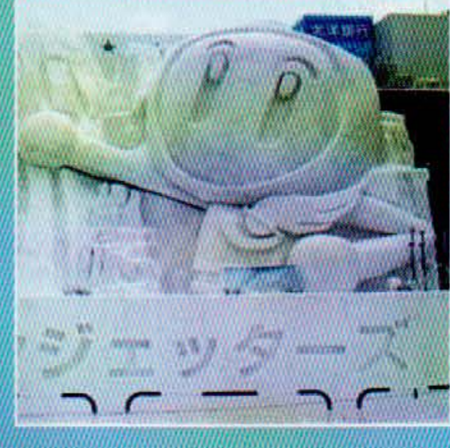
Number of times a typical Japanese businessman bows per day: **200-300**

Number of GBA SPs Nintendo plans to ship worldwide in the 2003 financial year: **20m**

Number of years since the invention of the 3.5inch floppy disk: **21**



Game thriller ice, baby. Finally, a slippy-slidey ice world that doesn't exist solely to imitate







Edge has been trying half-rotation and punch all evening, but just can't get this to work in real life...



...mainly because Edge can't find its D-pad. Or punch button. Still, maybe that's for the best...



...as deadlines are harsh enough without the office being on fire as well. Now that would be hardcore

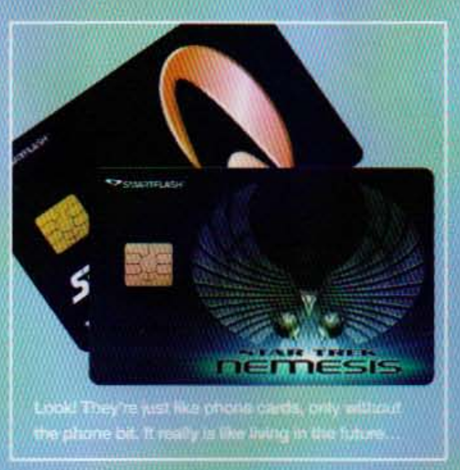




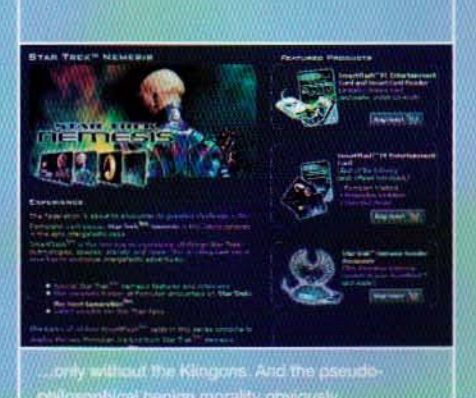
Gaming losing its appeal? See for yourself whether things used to be better thanks to Atari TV Games







Look! They're just like phone cards, only without the phone bit. It really is like living in the future...



...only without the Klingons. And the pseudo-philosophical benign morality obviously



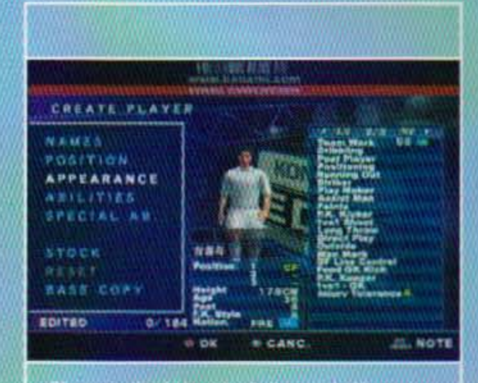


Well, now football has a near-perfect simulation Edge turns its attention to more pressing issues





Like where's the *Winning Eleven* equivalent of 'Footballers' Wives'? Now there's a licence for you



Of course, they'd have to do it properly. No post-release hermaphrodite patches for example

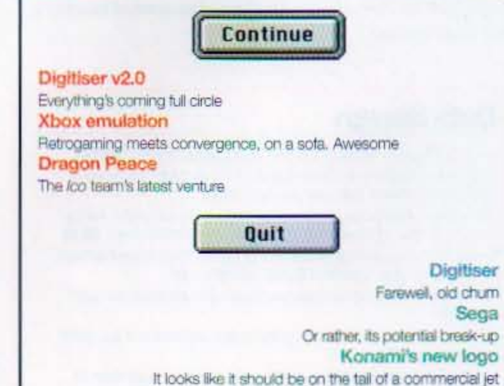


06 What's the Klingon for rip-off?

UK: Fear not, citizens of the Federation. Despite finding your love incomprehensible, Out There will restate the geek alliance mantra – "When they came for the Trekkies, I did not speak out, for I was not a Trekkie", etc – and try to resist the obvious cheap shots. Still, when it comes to the lunacy of memorabilia, the series does tend to boldly licence where no products have been licensed before. Which brings us nicely to the SmartFlash PC Smart Card Reader, a USB device which, when plugged into your PC and complemented with one of Smartflash's *Star Trek Nemesis* PC Entertainment Cards, promises a "new way to experience all things 'Star Trek'". Which essentially means that it pulls up a pretty title screen, hops onto the Internet and tells you where the planet Vulcan is. Collect all four! Of course, this is only the beginning – Smartflash promises that future cards will offer music, games, sport, and more – although it's telling that it's chosen to aim the system at a demographic whose desire for collecting items purporting to be from the future is only rivalled by their lust for a traditional Klingon marriage. To use the card reader you must have a PC and Internet connection. Complete lack of self-respect is obviously a huge bonus too.

07 Patch of the day

Italy: Finding the perfect football game is tricky. Either you get the right kits, smart player likenesses and passé gameplay in *FIFA*, or you get a nonsense version of reality and rather good gaming with *Pro Evolution Soccer*. Or, if you're truly dedicated, you import the latest version of *Winning Eleven* thrice yearly from Japan. But even that has the silly player names, the half-hearted likenesses, the goddamned oranges. So, proving that a) If you want a job doing properly, get a mysterious collective on the Internet to do it for you, and b) That patching is no longer for losers – step forward WeDoIt, a *Winning Eleven: Final Evolution* patch which replaces all the kits, player names, adds proper sponsors, better sound effects, new music, and translates the whole lot into English. Application of the patch isn't exactly painless, requiring an original copy of the game, a CD-writer, and a pretty comprehensive grasp of Internet back alleys, But as for the end result… well, it's probably enough to make copyright holders everywhere as sick as parrots, but players around the planet are likely to be over the moon.





09 Broken Angels

Teacher Richard Morgan hasn't done badly since the movie rights to his excellent debut, 'Altered Carbon', were bought by shaker Joel Silver for a cool $1 million. For one thing, he's become an ex-teacher, now concentrating on writing full-time. 'Broken Angels' is the first fruit of this change of circumstance. Morgan's new work continues with the same universe. Our anti-hero, hardboiled ex-special force operative, Takeshi Kovacs, is fighting a low-level dirty civil war in a godforsaken corner of the 26th century. Recruited into a risky but lucrative scheme to gain the salvage rights on a mysterious Martian artefact, Kovacs' mercenary skills are put to good use as he assembles and leads the crack team required for the mission. He does this by resleeving experts killed in the conflict into new custom bodies for the mission. The distinction between those who remain alive in silicon, awaiting re-animation, and those who are truly informationally dead, is one of the defining aspects of Morgan's world. Crudely put, it asks how our view of life changes if death is merely the loss of information from the point at which you last backed yourself up? But there is a different atmosphere this time round. Whereas 'Altered Carbon' was 'Gibson shot through with traces of Ellroy', 'Broken Angels' is a more straightforward heavymetal romp. Like the grunt of 'Aliens' after the suspense of 'Alien', it has plenty of action but less of the guile which made 'Altered Carbon' so special. It's still good but maybe the caustic success of Hollywood is already having its effect. Let's hope not.

10 Diamond Dogs, Turquoise Days

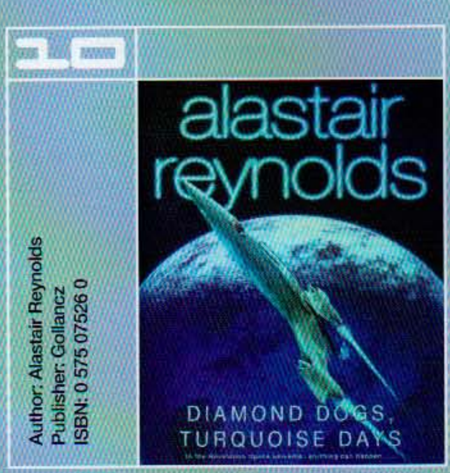
It's been a great month for UK sci-fi, what with two of its young turks, Richard Morgan and now Alastair Reynolds, both releasing new material. But while Morgan has gained most of the headlines with his action-heavy work, Reynolds' take on the future is more abstract, more mystical and perhaps for those reasons seems deeper. Based in the same Revelation Space setting of his main trilogy 'Diamond Dogs', 'Turquoise Days' consists of two elegantly-crafted novellas. Neither actually adds much concrete to our understanding of the way his world works. Instead they seem to be more like virtuoso pieces for Reynolds to focus on the relationships between specific characters; something which is lost within the broader scope of his longer, 'proper' novels. The first story, entitled Diamond Dogs is like something out of Roald Dahl: A team of experts sets out to explore a booby-trapped tower, known as the Blood Spire. No one knows who built it, or what secrets it contains, only that it's surrounded by the twisted remains of those who have previous tried to unlock its secrets. 'Turquoise Days' is altogether less sinister and focuses on the Pattern Jugglers, a water-based alien entity which acts as a sort of neural library of intelligence. After losing Mina, her sister, in an accidental encounter with the Pattern Jugglers, Naqi devotes her life to researching the behaviour of the species, never sure if Mina's consciousness still exists within the amorphous organism. Despite being slight in size, both stories pack a punch beyond their words.

09



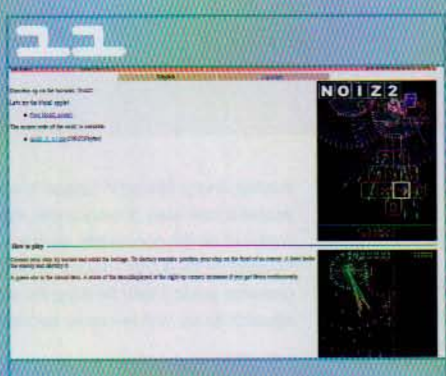
Author: Richard Morgan
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07324 1

10



Author: Alastair Reynolds
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07526 0

11



Site: **Noiz2 Applet**
URL: **www.asahi-net.or.jp/~CS8K-CYU/java/noiz2_e.html**

11 Website of the month

E120's timewasting Shockwave experience, *Zookeeper*, was intensely addictive but essentially sedate, in a fluffy puzzle kind of way. *Noiz2* is its exact opposite – heart stopping and aggressive, but just as unmissable and infuriatingly addictive. A vertically-scrolling shooter with graphics so pared down that they barely exist, the game offers 11 levels of hypnotic (and increasingly ridiculous) bullet patterns for you to nimbly flick your pointer around. There is nothing more to it than that, other than a solid scoring system and an inevitable feeling of inadequacy on the part of the player. Enjoy.

12 Advertainment

Japan: Damn, missed it by one issue. Oh well, here's the ad for last month's lead review. Shhh, it's about to start…




A meeting is in progress. "You, give me the report. Yes, the one in front of you," says the stern CEO.



The employee begins obeying when, suddenly, as if possessed, he crunches it into a ball.



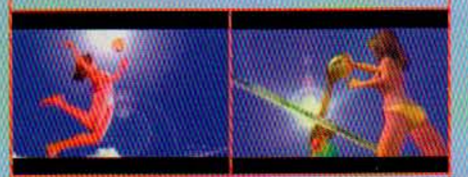
"Here we go!" he screams adopting (*DoA* girl) Kasumi's voice, and promptly launches the report.



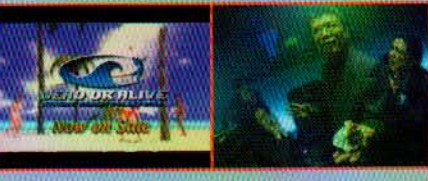
"I'll get it," says another man in a woman's voice before throwing the 'ball' across the boardroom.



Another female voice: "Come on, someone get it!" But the report hits CEO in the face. Everyone stops.



Seems like a perfect time for an interlude of game sequences from *DoA Xtreme Beach Volleyball*.



"Now it's your turn," says the CEO. You've guessed it, he's adopted a female voice, too! Crazy.



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

Either archive videogames or lose them forever

Is plagiarism a criminal offence? RedEye is playing *Sticky Wicket*, BBC Sport Online's Flash game to celebrate the Cricket World Cup. It is a carbon copy of *Donkey Kong*, only with sharper graphics, cricket-themed character design, and an analogue jump. Three things occur to RedEye in sequence: i) That *Donkey Kong* is a damn good game, ii) That many *Sticky Wicket* players won't be familiar with the original, and iii) That most of those who've played it recently will have done so illegally, through emulation, and thus are damned to spend eternity having their pirate asses spanked by ELSPA's overlord, Roger Bennett. Criminals!

Weep for victim Nintendo. They schooled the kids to catch 'em all, and by God, it certainly worked in their favour. Maybe it kept them in business, just like *Halo* gave the Xbox a chance and the PS2 might not have been in the position it is right now without *GTAIII*. We'll never know how that game changes historical archives. But if you want to play a really old videogame, for nostalgia or research, you have very little choice. You can wait for it to come up on eBay, you can scour car boot sales, or you can screw both options and download it from amateur retrologists, who squirrel themselves away in the darkest corners of the interweb, scared that the copyright police will come and lay the smackdown on their diligent work.

It's a mess. But rather than just whine about it, RedEye's suggesting a workable solution, and telling ELSPA that doing their job properly isn't just about toothless age ratings or shouting bullish nonsense every time someone suggests videogames might be too expensive. We are meant to be a maturing industry, so let's have a little respect for our history, and let Redeye introduce a soon-to-be-registered charity: the European Videogame Archive.

EVA's mission statement would be to produce a complete record of every videogame ever produced, look good (ELSPA, TIGA, publishers, the British government), EVA would not make a profit, but would certainly prove as popular as, say, the Museum Of the Moving Image (MOMI) in New York, or any publicly-funded historical archive. Expansion would bring a larger museum, more focused exhibitions, and here's a stroke of gimmicky genius. While all originals would stay within the confines of EVA's pixel-shaded walls, if visitors wanted to take a copy of a game home with them, they'd be welcome to. EVA would have a small backroom where any existing game could be copied, tape-to-tape, floppy-to-floppy, even to blank cartridges. A printer would clone the covers and labels from scans of the originals, adding a discreet EVA logo somewhere. Cost? Nominal; materials, plus a gratuity for the copyright holder and EVA. You could walk in and buy a brand new 2003 reissue of *Jet Set Willy* for a quid. Geek gift heaven.

our history. But *Pokémon* did play on a natural compulsion to collect and organise, developing it to feverish proportions. Gottacatch'emall. Gotta keep daddy Mario in princesses and mushrooms.

But "catch 'em all" doesn't have a caveat. It's a demand, and just as applicable to Game Boy titles. Pirated ROMs are no longer the eclectic randomly-named tablets of old, but regimented, sequentially numbered thrills created by amateur archivists. And because they're numbered now, they're collectable.

The videogame industry has a curious relationship with emulation. On the one hand we are always told that ROMs are a bad thing, that they are piracy and that owning them without owning the original cart is a lot like, well, you know, home taping and so on. But RedEye's yet to meet a developer who doesn't appreciate the beauty of Xbox MAME, or a games journalist (who cares about games) who hasn't got a massive collection of emulated software somewhere on their writing machine's hard drive. Besides, there is an argument for emulation that goes above and beyond the need for entertainment. There is a historical need for them.

If you want to read an old book you can go to the library. If it's not there, you go to a bigger library. There will be a record of it somewhere. If you want to watch an old film, you can buy or rent it. If you can't find it in the bigger stores, there are always the indies to try. And if you can't find it there, then there are created, and published in Europe. It would also be to archive a hard copy of every game, along with copies of design documents, sketches, and – where released by the author – source code. EVA's physical presence would initially be along the lines of a research library, with resources accessible to members of institutions who paid its membership fee; universities, developers, publications, individuals. Anything stored electronically could be requested and delivered electronically. But for the real experience, one would have to visit EVA in person.

EVA's building would be gently lit and filled with quiet, soundproofed booths. Visitors would select games on terminals and book slots to use hardware of their choice. When their turn came, they would have a garish game box thrust into their trembling hands, and be directed towards the appropriate machine. No emulation there; it would provide the full experience. They would have the tedium of waiting for a game to load, the pain of switching disks and the exhilaration of jamming fingers in the disk drive to jinx the software into working.

Funded by membership, sponsorship, and charitable donations from parties with a vested interest in making the European software industry

"EVA's mission statement would be to produce a complete record of every videogame ever produced, created and published in Europe"

So what's the problem? You can't buy these games any more; no major retailer stocks them second-hand; and the people who go to boot sales and backstreet retro shops to seek them out want originals anyway. It's not devaluing anything, just providing people with an opportunity to revisit old games as they were intended. So who loses? At worst we would have a static record of what we've done; at best we're educating people, indicating to the general public that this isn't a craze, it's an art with a history and a future. The path that the videogame is taking is continually branching, and at present, that path is only being archived by amateurs, by the underground, and our reward to them is potential prosecution. We can curse the pirates as much as we want, but in 20 years' time those perfectly labeled ROMs will be the only coherent record we have of what we've been doing. *Pokémon* may have affected the direction of gaming, but only as much as hundreds of games from throughout the 20th century, and leaving any record of that to chance is really, really criminal.

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s*

In the dark, cold days of the year's beginning, with the release schedules looking threadbare and a stack of me-too firstperson shooters, gaily coloured platformers and 'extreme' driving games tottering, discarded, next to the console stack, the videogame scene can appear bleak.

Relief from the tedium can come in many ways. It can come from attending the chilled-out Gamehotel conference in Paris (see p12) and being enthused by the creative joy and wackiness of Japanese character designers Devilrobots and performance calligraphy from *Mojibribon* designer Kiri Matsuura. Or it can come from an addictive Shockwave game, such as *Junkbot* (www.lego.com/build/junkbot/junkbot.asp), a brilliant marriage of *Lemmings* with Lego. Or it can come from idly contemplating videogames of the past and remembering a flash of weird brilliance that is due for reappraisal, a kind of slumbering spirit that ought to be reawakened for the good of the industry.



TRIGGER HAPPY

Steven Poole

A trip down an overgrown path just off Memory Lane

In the early- to mid-'80s, a small British softco called Automata produced perhaps the most avant-garde videogames ever seen. *Pimania* (1982) was a lurid text adventure hosted by the Pi-Man, a hideous creation whose head came off when he danced, grimacing, across the screen, and who taunted the player with psychedelic laughter and insults. The experience was rendered more confusing by the requirement to move, not in the usual north/south/east/west manner of text adventures, but according to the 12 directions of a clockface. The object of the game was to discover, by means of some extremely obscure clues, the location of a diamond-encrusted golden sundial worth £6,000 that the programmers had hidden somewhere in Britain, and thereby win it. (Eventually, three years after the game's release, the sundial was found by two intrepid gamers in the mouth of the chalk white horse in Sussex.)

My Name is Uncle Groucho, You Win a Fat Cigar (1983) followed, and the prize was a trip for two to meet the film star whose name was subtly encoded somewhere in the game. The game required you to explore buildings in major US cities, controlling a wisecracking, stick-figure Groucho Marx. *Groucho* and *Pimania* were games that didn't talk down to their audience but revelled in the pun-happy intellects of their creators, Mel Croucher and Christian Penfold. They boasted horrendously entertaining rock songs, with lyrics themed to the games, on side B of the cassettes. They were crudely animated and programmed in BASIC, but they were unique experiences even in those more experimental days.

And then came the studio's masterpiece, *Deus Ex Machina* (1984), a compelling Orwellian nightmare requiring the player to breed a humanoid organism out of a mouse dropping and negotiate life's hurdles of Defect Police, sex, politics and increasing physical decrepitude. Effectively a series of strangely philosophical mini-games, *Machina* was designed to be played alongside a synchronised tape-recorded soundtrack that featured the vocal talents of Jon Pertwee, Ian Dury and Frankie Howerd, along with dark prog-rock soundscapes of Croucher's devising. It was the videogame version of a concept album. I remember playing it at the time, and finding it bizarre, confusing and sometimes just dull, but it was also hypnotic, fascinating and totally new. Some day, I assumed, all games would be something like this.

And of course, they aren't. Occasionally a game surfaces, like Sega's *Seaman*, which seems to owe something to the aesthetic vanguard of *Deus Ex Machina* or Croucher's subsequent experiment in language-parsing artificial intelligence, *ID*. And then it vanishes without trace. Mel Croucher has turned his back on the industry that grew into billions of dollars' worth of corporate marketing; he now runs an Internet brand consultancy business (www.my-reputation.com). But what might it mean for intrepid modern designers to track back through the historical jungle, find his overgrown path, and try to extend it?

"There are still people with the passion to extend the possibilities of the videogame form, a refusal to be satisfied by what rules the market today"

The Automata games represent the continuing possibility of a style of videogame that doesn't just depend on brutally defined short-term goals, such as go there and/or kill that. In fact Croucher evinced a strong opposition to violent games in any form. Ian Dury's character in *Deus Ex Machina* at one point intones, "Killing is wrong, even pretend killing. And people that sell violent games to children should be put away till they get well again." We don't have to take such a stern moral stance to recognise that violence in games rapidly becomes monotonous, especially when it is the only form of interaction available to the player. *The Getaway*, for example, begins by being refreshing and challenging in its very 'adult'-themed action and language; as the bodies pile up, and you realise that there is no other way to complete a mission than to make sure you're the last man standing, it becomes increasingly joyless.

Even when it's not about spraying ammo like there's no tomorrow, your average videogame experience grabs you by the collar and doesn't let go, ordering you about, telling you to do this and then that, and condescendingly offers a new toy or cut-scene as one gives a dog a treat for performing tricks. The player's role in contributing to the experience with his imagination, or the opportunity to interact thoughtfully with something that is intelligently designed, is all too rare. What the Automata oeuvre represents, is the kind of videogame that isn't really a game – at least not as we know it. It's not really a game because it's free from the clichéd micromechanics of challenge-reward. It's not really a game because it values language as much as visuals. It's not really a game because it's an intellectually provocative experience, rather than an adrenaline-soaked race through repetitive tasks.

Flashes of these qualities are recognisable from time to time in today's games. In *Shenmue* (for all its faults), or *Ico* (despite the aesthetically incongruous twitch elements of the combat), the spark continues. In the minefield-strewn landscape of 'interactive narrative', too, there is evidence, as in the haunting *Shadow of Memories*, or EA's unhappily doomed *Majestic*, or Quantic Dream's intriguing work-in-progress, *Fahrenheit*, that there are still people out there with the passion that drove Croucher, a passion to extend the unmapped possibilities of the videogame form, a refusal to be satisfied by what rules the market today. Whether they succeed or fail in making excellent products, the attempt should always be applauded. Look at the pile of well made, safe, utterly generic 'next-generation' videogames on my carpet. It doesn't have to be like this.

Steven Poole is the author of 'Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames' (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com





AV OUT

Toshihiro Nagoshi, president, Amusement Vision

Network play can save the arcade, but let's be careful out there

The other day, the AOU Show took place. It is the second biggest arcade event after JAMMA. I've been developing a game in collaboration with Nintendo, and at last I was able to present it to people. I was so relieved it had good feedback. In fact, it took first place in a show poll, so it was a great event from a personal perspective. There were problems – fewer makers and fewer products – but something else stunned me this year; the incredible popularity of the network feature. This has happened so quickly; arcades linked together, online ranking and IC Cards all over the place. Today's arcade has changed dramatically and that makes it very difficult for the games which don't have these features. I took this into consideration while developing *F-Zero AC*, and chose to put the Card and online ranking feature in the game. But I didn't think this would happen so fast or be so widespread.

So why has it happened? The most common answer from people on the show floor was, "There is nothing else new happening in the arcade lately, so network gaming has become the focus of the entire industry". I understand that. It is always better for salesmen to have a key point to sell. But sometimes it feels like developers are forgetting the content. Some people at the AOU show questioned the sense in having network features in certain games. Others didn't seem worried which makes me more concerned. Because using a feature just because it looks cool, when conditions for its use and marketing aren't ready gives a false image of that feature, right?

Now, on to the idea of network gaming. The infrastructure is there, and this is surely the key factor in the network boom. But people should look back at the Dreamcast in the home consumer market. It is a good example of a good thing which went wrong, and the same thing is about to happen in the arcade. People are rushing, jeopardizing all the current efforts. The game design process should begin with thinking of a cool feature to base your game design around. This should be the starting point. Then you can think about whether the network feature is something gamers will pay extra for. But with network gaming, this order is upside down. People are starting with the idea of "Let's use the network feature" and that makes me really worried. Don't misunderstand me – I believe in network gaming, but only when it's used correctly. I also think we can get a real arcade boom from it, but we need many titles based on it. By that, I mean that we need lots of network games, not games with a network component.

Indeed, we need to think of new, exciting uses of the network feature, so users actually feel it's justified, and have fun with. When this new idea has an impact on the industry, other makers will begin to use it as a base for their own developments. They will take the idea, and combine it with their brand image and their game-making philosophy. This new wave of software will trigger the boom.

For example, Sega's bike racing game *Hang On* became an instant hit. It was the first truly successful racing game, and that made manufacturers understand that these games could be done technically and with fun. Then came another title, targeting a wider audience: *OutRun*. This time, the idea really caught on. Every game maker targeted arcade racers, as they were easily accepted by a wide range of users. The car theme was the core element, and makers developed it with ideas of their own, like special cabinets. The cabinet is a key point, because it gave each maker the chance to distinguish its title from the competition. Then came the concept of 'Vs' games which caused a positive reaction among players. It was the natural evolution for driving games.

This process then gave birth to the fighting game. Makers understood that this Vs essence was a key factor for development and tried to find new, fun ways to bring competition to the arcade. Games were now designed, not as fighting games, but as Vs fighting games, and players were acquiring new skills to enjoy them. *Virtua Fighter* made the Vs fighting game 3D, and so on.

This evolution is the correct method but we're not currently doing that because, while everyone is copying network gaming, no one manufacturer has come up with a truly satisfying way of using it. So where will this evolution take us? Well, any new technology or new feature naturally creates a lot of excitement and hope, and because the current climate is not good, this hope is even greater. I understand that. But, if these technologies or features are used in very cheap products, players will inevitably think, "That's all?". The damage will be done.

If that happens... well, when you associate something with negative feelings, it's very hard to fix that. And there are many examples of failures where technology has been forced to grow too fast. We have to be careful, and there's a good reason for that. I honestly believe arcade network is the future. If used correctly, I can see tremendous growth and development for the arcade videogame business in the coming ten years. I really feel the potential. I have tons of ideas and I hear the same thing from creators around me. That's why we need to be careful, let the flower open itself, not force it. I want people to think arcades are fun again; I want that kind of flower. And if the network gaming boom is a success, that should trigger an evolution in the sluggish offline market. Why? Come on, think. You still don't get it? Okay, I'll explain this point another time. See you!

"I believe arcade network is the future. But we need to think of new, exciting uses for it so users actually feel its justified and have fun with it"

Toshihiro Nagoshi is president of Amusement Vision, formerly Sega subsidiary Soft R&D #4

Napoleon said that, "History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon." And he should know; the short-arse conqueror practically lived in the past. Lamentably, so do most gamers over the age of 25.

If you assemble at gunpoint a random panel of 100 gamers, and ask them to give you a potted history of videogames, they'll all agree on one thing; games just aren't as good as they used to be. Innovation has faded away to be replaced by corporate, identikit mush… every other game is a licence… franchises are milked until their teats turn transparent… yadda yadda something.

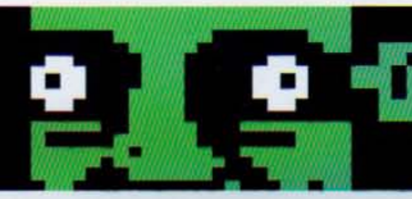
But of course games aren't as good as they used to be. Nothing contemporary is as good as it was in the past. The summers were warmer, the winters whiter, the telly better, Gareth Gates hadn't even been born, and this entire magazine was fields as far as the eye could see.

Just before Christmas last year Doctor Maudlin was pinning me to the sofa and, with the festive period looming, 30-something cynicism had taken hold. I came to bemoan the fact that growing up is the worst thing ever and I was desperate to feel that familiar warm glow inside (no, not the one induced by Mr Jim Beam). I wanted to feel like a kid again, like I always did in the run-up to Christmas, when I'd creep into my parents' bedroom to 'borrow' my presents and copy them all onto a C-60. Yes it was a bad thing to do, but my cloak-and-dagger routine became a tradition, and Christmas has never been the same since I had to start buying my own presents. Alcohol-induced amnesia while Christmas shopping somehow doesn't work.

So I turned to that first port of call for any gaming nostalgic; the emulator. I downloaded all three of the aforementioned games, along with other highlights, such as *Jet Set Willy* and *Underwurlde*, and – a classics – *Robocop Vs Terminator*, *Super Punch-Out!!*, *Pilotwings* – managed to disappoint without exception. Even *Super Mario World* was a letdown; leaden controls and indistinct visuals. Only *Yoshi's Island* provided anything approaching solace, but even that was repetitive. It was akin to a Catholic priest unearthing incontrovertible proof that Christ was actually a time-travelling Ronald McDonald.

I did the only thing I could do: I deleted every game, and every emulator, and erased the bookmarks that had led me to them. I swore there and then never to look back, to keep my eyes focused on the here, the now, and the soon-to-be. Given that the future is all we have to look forward to, this isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Certainly in the UK, there's a culture of cynicism among gamers. A brief sojourn onto any forum and it's clear that we're a society of whingers who are never satisfied with our lot. Games are never



BIFFOVISION

Page 28, press hold, and reveal. 'Digitiser's founder speaks out

Mr Biffo most definitely does not love 1982

Back then we all viewed the world through more innocent eyes. Everything was new and brilliant and gleaming and cooed at through Ribena-stained lips, and deep down we'd like to hold onto that part of our life because it's the foundation of who we are. That said, a three-foot deep trench makes a great foundation for a house, but it's no place to live.

Sigmund Freud believed that, compared to other species, humans are a bit rubbish. Unlike monkeys, who instinctively know how to eat bananas, or ants, who have a biological drive to ruin picnics, we come into the world incomplete. Aside from that immediate urge to suckle the nearest lady's breast (which never really goes away), we must learn our survival techniques through direct experience. Our personalities and opinions are imprinted on us in much the same way. Therefore, whatever our initial emotions are when we first encounter games, we have those emotions flash-frozen into our psyche.

It must have been Christmas '82, when I had the word 'gamer' branded on my skull. My dad had set up a ZX Spectrum to display the words 'Merry Christmas' (a feat that took him over a month) as we all came downstairs. With it I received copies of *Horace and the Spiders*, *Ah Diddums!* and *Haunted Hedges*. Prior to this I'd only ever played with worms, or my father's empty gin bottles, and to that innocent boy it was an amazing world, and *Horace* and *Haunted Hedges* were the greatest things ever.

particular milestone in my personal gamesplaying experience – *3D Seiddab Attack*. For the first few minutes all was well. My nostalgia gland was pumping nicely, filling my heart and head with rose-tinted endorphins. I was briefly transported back to '82, as sights, sounds and smells gurgled up from the deepest trench of my psyche. You could keep your polygons and your multi-artiste soundtracks and your AI; here was a man in a top hat collecting glasses, in a primary-coloured world, and it was 100 times better than any game developed since.

But then it all went wrong. My gaze drifted towards my GameCube, Xbox and PS2. I felt like an adulterer, embarking on a torrid fling with my first girlfriend, suddenly realising that she hadn't aged well. Hopes of recapturing that youthful glee burst like bubbles, and reality took a stranglehold around my throat. These games weren't good. The graphics stuttered, the controls were glitchy and there were more bugs than you'd find beneath the average schizophrenic's skin. Could I really have dedicated days of my life to playing such abominations?

Becoming desperate, I hit the Internet once more, skipping a generation and downloading a bunch of SNES titles. Games I remembered as

long enough, or pretty enough, or they're too expensive, or their stories aren't strong enough, or the voice acting is crap…

Christ – we've only had proper voices in games in the last eight years. When films first became talkies the actors spoke like Mogadonised robots.

"You've never had it so good. If you'd shown Metroid Prime to a group of gamers from 1982 you'd probably have been burned at the stake as a witc

Games are still in their infancy but – as I discovered on my recent nostalgia trip – the important thing is that they're getting better all the time. Yes, there are plenty of games that deserve to be cussed, and yes there are too many of the same sorts of games, and yes the stories are almost always dreadful, but broadly speaking you've never had it so good. If you'd shown *Metroid Prime* to a group of gamers from 1982 you'd probably have been burned at the stake as a witch. Frankly, even today's worst game has got to be better than my own previous benchmark of excellence, *3D Seiddab Attack*.

I'll be going back to emulation, but I shall not linger, and my expectations will be more realistic. Knowing, as I do now, that I won't find the secret of Greek fire at the base of the banyan tree.

Mr Biffo is a semi-retired videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge's***

Edge's most wanted

Warhammer Online

It's still some way off and it's evolved quite a bit since **Edge** first saw it, but it's still looking pretty good. And that's not just nostalgia for little lead men talking.



(PC) Climax

Fable

No, it probably won't deliver everything first promised, but Fable will at least allow you to grow old disgracefully so there's no regrets from the deathbed.



(Xbox) Microsoft

Deus Ex: Invisible War

Boasting a spangly new HUD interface and shiny new graphics, **Edge** is just hoping Invisible War maintains the delightfully open-ended gameplay of the original.



(Xbox, PC, PS2) Eidos

Doom III

id can afford to wait until it's ready with this, which might be frustrating for fanboys including **Edge**, but surely it also bodes well for the finished product.



(PC) Activision

Mid-life crisis

With a noticeable lack of inspiring new titles about, **Edge** asks, "Is it time for the industry to grow up?"

So it comes to that time of the year again when **Edge** really ought to be getting excited about sampling the gaming fruits that the future has to offer. E3's just around the corner, all three current console platforms are entering the mature phase of their life cycle, and publishers ought to be recouping their early investment in R&D by taking advantage of the large potential audiences offered by the widespread penetration of gaming hardware.

But the cupboard's looking a little bare. Sure, every platform has something to look forward to, and the likes of *Doom III* and the *Deus Ex* follow-up are genuinely exciting prospects. Likewise, *Halo 2* and the inevitable *Grand Theft Auto* sequel, while Nintendo will be bringing out a new *Mario Kart* title as well as a *Donkey Kong* game. But with PAL gamers having only just got their hands on *Metroid Prime*, it's likely to be a drip-feed. And, aside from these rather familiar franchises, there's not a lot on the horizon. Maybe it's just **Edge**, but it certainly feels quieter than ever before.

This paucity of interesting titles is surely a sign that the current industry model just isn't working. The hit-driven nature of the videogame industry has already produced a number of notable losers (*Quantum Redshift* developer, Curly Monsters, is the latest casualty as **Edge** goes to press). But it's also, ironically, resulting in a range of subject matter that seems to be getting narrower all the time as publishers attempt to incestuously ape anything remotely successful in their desperate bid to chase the next big hit.

With the next generation of consoles not expected to arrive for another couple of years, it really doesn't look like anything's going to change in the very near future. It certainly doesn't seem as if the drive to promote online gaming will open up new audiences for gaming. Indeed, it may even polarise the industry yet further, since online gaming requires such a significant investment of time on the part of players – leaving little scope for playing any more than a handful of titles.

It's difficult not to reach the conclusion that this narrowing subject matter and polarised business structure is to blame for at least some of the letters that **Edge** receives on a monthly basis from gamers who are disillusioned with the current state of gaming. And it's something that the industry needs to remedy if it is to ever really mature.









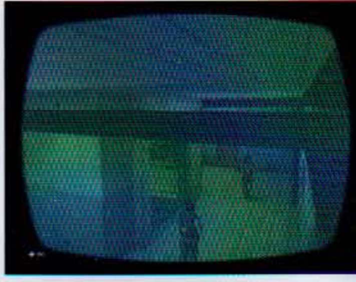






XIII is action with panache, and a game close to the heart of anyone who's woken up on the beach with a fresh tattoo on the torso





A hand icon hovers over anything that can be interacted with. CCTV cameras, for instance, will reveal the patrol paths of enemies ahead



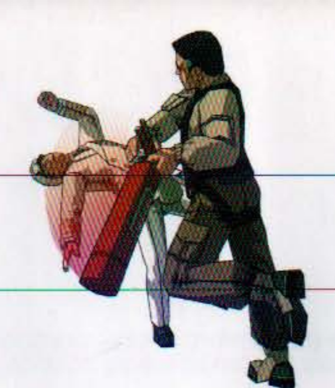
What would you get if you put a bunch of terrorists in a room with transparent paper and marker pens? Cel-shading. Which is a bad joke, but no more incongruous than Ubi Soft's effort to mix the hard realism found in most FPS titles with a comic book aesthetic. And **Edge** admits to being sceptical when it first saw the game just after the then un-subtitled *Zelda* game was revealed. However, playable code shows that *XIII* is more than just a trend follower.

The game is based on the Belgian comic book of the same name and explores one of the most intriguing premises known to script writers – the amnesiac hero on the run. After waking up on the beach and discovering a tattoo – 'XIII' etched on the torso – and a key to a safety deposit box, it's up to the player to avoid a number of pursuing hostile agents and ascertain exactly what the hell is going on. Conspiracy theorist fans will also be delighted to hear that there's a JFK-style 'who-shot-the-president?' plot thread woven into the fabric to keep you interested throughout.

"Based on a Belgian comic, *XIII* explores one of the most intriguing premises known to script writers – the amnesiac hero on the run"

Forgetting the wonderful visuals for a moment, *XIII* is likely to be an engaging FPS in its own right. From the levels **Edge** has played through it appears that the emphasis is most definitely on stealth rather than manic firefights. One level takes place in the Appalachian mountains where a general, secured inside a military base, appears to know something about your identity. Snow falls, moves and blurs as you run through the trees to reach the destination and this significantly enhances the game's atmosphere. Once inside the base you discover that a new enemy has killed the sentries and you must find the general before he is murdered. Escaping involves a mad rus to a cable car, which is then threatened with destruction by enemies armed with bazookas

The OTT plot and scenarios suit the cel-shaded style perfectly and the comic book premise is further emphasised in a number o interesting ways. Stealth kill an enemy in a particularly gruesome way and the deed is recorded in three smaller frames that appear in the top left portion of the screen. These frames alter depending on your angle of attack and weapon used. The developers have also implemented what they are calling 'sixth sense' to add to the graphic novel ambience. Whenever a guard is walking behind a door, for instance, you will see the 'tap' sound appear on screen to symbolise h movement. And because *XIII* is not shackled by 'realism', a very handy 180 degree quick-



Format: **Xbox, PS2, GC**
Publisher: **Ubi Soft**
Developer: **In-house (Ubi Soft France)**
Origin: **France**
Release: **Autumn**

Previously in **E**112







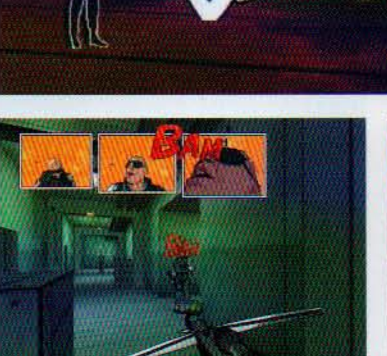

Ubi Soft's dedication to bringing a graphic novel aesthetic to videogames is admirable, and on present evidence the game is not just style over substance. Much of the enjoyment is likely to come from exploring new locales and unravelling the mystery surrounding *XIII*'s past. An exclusive online mode will appear on PS2

turn (by pressing down the right analogue stick) has also been implemented. It demonstrates that a commendable level of thought has been put into bringing two media disciplines together.

In terms of raw gameplay mechanics it is noticeable that the player has access to a wide variety of weapons, both conventional and unconventional. Bottles and chairs can be used to bludgeon enemies and it is even possible to throw shards of glass at unsuspecting foes to take them out quietly. At the start of the game you fight with what you can find, but towards the end Uzis, M16s and bazookas will all be available to inflict the maximum amount of pain on the enemy. The more destructive weapons are very satisfying; throw a grenade and a cel-shaded swoosh charts its trajectory, then when it lands – 'Kaboom!' a Batman-style explosion accompanies the impact.

XIII is likely to be one of the most interesting and atmospheric FPSs in recent memory, but it is also showing signs of suffering from the same level of linearity that defined Splinter Cell. While linearity is no bad thing in itself, the task-based gameplay evident in *XIII* may leave those hankering after another *Halo* disappointed. Though the AI is still being worked on it is clear that *XIII* offers a series of engaging challenges rather than unpredictable emergent gameplay.

More appealing though is the news that all versions will contain online multiplayer options. These will include deathmatch, team deathmatch and capture the flag games. Microsoft will support all these modes through Xbox Live while the team is working closely with SCEE to develop a new online option for PS2 owners. Expect *XIII* to charm gamers the world over when it's released this autumn.





Stealth kills are rewarded with extra cel-frames that focus in on the point of impact. Discarded objects can also be used to devastating effect: a shard of glass can prove a pain in the neck for the unsuspecting

Core

Format: Xbo
Publisher: CD
Developer: UDS Gothenbur
Origin: Sweder
Release: TBC

Developers' modern romance with platformers contines unabated. But will Core suit a generation of gamers becoming weary of such fare?









Rex's K9 senses help you trace enemies via the power of smell alone. He can also listen in to conversations undetectable to the human ear





UDS has based its vibrant artistic style on Tim Burton's work, "but with a more colourful touch"

Edge suspects there is a subtext. Listen to this from the UDS press release: "A huge drilling monolith bursts out of the ground shooting half a kilometre up in the sky. The leaders of this ship, the Kranks, make it clear that they have no intention of sparing anyone in their plan of exploitation and conquest using a giant weapon of mass destruction." All negotiations fail so Earth's last hope for a peaceful resolution lies with a conglomeration of three superpowers.

Okay, so maybe that's stretching things a bit. Especially when those entities consist of three friends called Pixie, Rex and Madboy. They have to enter the Kranks' doomsday device and defeat the enemy from within. Still with us? The Kranks consist of three brothers Tic von Tac, the creator of the 'Krank Tank', Hunter Bunter, an obsessive weapons inspector with a cannon in his head and the splendidly named Dr Coond, a man who loves meting out slow, painful torture. The game is being developed in Sweden.

At this early stage, it is looking impressive, at least in the visual department. The cartoon style reflects the childish sense of humour evident in the press release: "What are the style influences for *Core*? A wild baboon with a crayon stuck in its butt... programmers are inspired heavily by talk shows and David Hasselhoff." Right. So we can expect a Scandinavian version of a Rare game then.

As with all modern platform games, *Core* contains a feature that makes it a little differen from its peers. A mad professor, called Dr Samuelsen, invented the magnificent Core suit just before he went missing. If any of the three heroes climb inside the suit they are imbued with special powers. Pixie is an athletic girl that can use the suit's claw arms to grapple objects and climb sheer cliffs. Rex a yipping Chihuahua, transforms the suit into a four legged super-fast running creature. An Madboy can use the strength of the Core sui to punch out enemies and break through walls and guard towers.

With enemies blessed with names as colourful as Zooks, Squidos, Poxes and Boffums, *Core* could well be strong competition for *Jak and Daxter 2*. Or it might just end up as another *Vexx* (see p103). Until **Edge** gets its hands on some playable code it'll be hard to assess whether the (not entirel innovative) Core suit conceit brings somethin inspirational to the platform game mix. We look forward to the next UDS press release, in any case.

Bokura no Taiyo

Format: **Game Boy Advance**
Publisher: **Konami**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **Summer (Japan), TBC (UK)**

Portable solar-powered vampire madness from the director of Metal Gear Solid? Stakes are high...

Who'd have thought it? Hideo Kojima, for so long the idol of PlayStation owners everywhere, is actually a bit of a Nintendo kid at heart. So much so that he's been wanting to produce a game for NCL for a while, despite knockbacks from a Konami marketing department that sees much more (financial) sense in another *Metal Gear*. But Kojima-san's stature gives weight to his desires, and so *Bokura no Taiyo* emerges from the shadows with him as both producer and game designer.

As revealed in **E**119's Out There, *BokTai's* defining aspect is the light sensor, which analyses the intensity of the light surrounding the player and changes the nature of the game. Apparently, as well as detecting the light level, the sensor can differentiate between artificial and natural light. An internal clock also adds data, enabling the game to understand the exact conditions you're playing in.

The hero of the adventure is a young boy named Jango, and the villainous force he faces comes predominantly from vampires. Which, naturally, is where the timing aspect comes in, because vampires sleep during the day. Also based on the clock are the traps, so different areas of the game will be accessible depending on when you're playing. Jango is armed with the ultimate anti vampire weapon: the Gun del Sol, which can be customised into three different shapes. But Kojima fans hoping for stealthy action will not be disappointed, since sneaking is still an option. Other standard videogame elements are there too: items have to be collected to help your survival, and at the end of each dungeon a boss is waiting for you.

What's more interesting is that you need certain conditions to defeat bosses. For example, one may require sunlight, so playing during a rainy day or at night will prove useless. That said, if everything goes right for you in the boss confrontation, and the weather's right in your part of the world, you'll be able to defeat the boss and bring him to a place called 'The Pile Driver'. There, the focussed sunlight will defeat him once and for all. The fact that the effectiveness of your gun will also depend on the sunlight means that those in the gloomier areas of the globe – ie Britain – may not have as good a time with *BokTai* as Kojima-san anticipates. A release is expected in the summer, although at the moment the cartridge is undergoing a redesign to make it SP compatible.









Remember the fun you had in class when the first solar-powered calculators came on the market? Well, *Bokura no Taiyo* is that times ten. But time will tell whether finding the right amount of light to defeat creatures proves engaging or irritating



Graphically Kojima-san's current project is heavily stylised with broad swathes of pastels infusing it with a fairytale mood. But will the sun-dependant gameplay make it unplayable in darker regions of the world? Don't expect it to sell any copies in Iceland

R-Type Final

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Irem**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **TBC**

One last, glorious sortie for Irem's favourite fighter? Or one mission too many?

The latest installment of the legendary *R-Type* franchise will also be the last. It's no secret that shooting games are not nearly as popular as they used to be, and consequently are much less financially viable than they were in the golden age of 16bit hardware (and even early on in the 32bit era). So Irem has officially announced the end of the *R-Type* series – not with an obituary press release, which it wouldn't consider fitting for such an illustrious name, but with a third and final episode.

While the series began 17 years ago in the arcade, it will finish on the PlayStation2 – fitting, since it's the domination of the console that's caused such a shift in the public's attitude to gaming. The game keeps the same 2D side-scrolling dynamic, and the same distinctive lead fighter with its famous power shield. Speed is controlled with L1 and L2, the circle button fires, while R1 switches the craft to autofire. The shield is managed with square.

R-Type Final – the name underlines the mission statement here – features more than 50 different ship models, although most will have to be unlocked, as will the descriptions that give players a greater insight into the reasoning behind them. After selecting a fighter players must take it to the hangar, where aspects of it can be customized to make a personal version – the colour of the front window and the ship's body, for example, as well as the weaponry and options. It's rumoured that Irem will include a few hidden spacecraft, like Mr Heli, but the company hasn't confirmed that as yet.

Fighting their way through the game will be something of a (twitchy, intense) wander down memory lane for veterans of the series, who'll recognize many famous enemy units and mid-level bosses. While the graphics are true to the series' aesthetics, this time they're in full 3D, allowing lots of glossy special effects, and creatures to attack from all directions. That recalls *R-Type Delta*, which appeared on the PlayStation to mixed reception. This time, though, Irem's artists hope to use better mech designs to greater effect, and also employ a more spectacular range of spot effects.





The number of stages hasn't been revealed, although Irem is promising dramatic changes within the thematic confines of each









Boss confrontations in *R-Type Final* are traditional ('shoot the eye') but tough, and feature graphical flourishes so far absent from the popular series

Fight a Friend

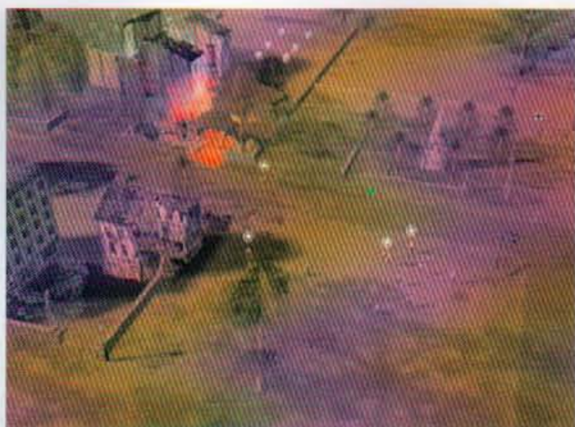
R-Type Final's AI Taisen mode is something like a Vs mode on autopilot. Players edit their spacecrafts with the intention of fighting another human opponent, then save the fighter to a PS2 memory card and take it round to a friend's house. The duel will take place automatically, AI pilots playing out the battle according to each player's strength and weaknesses.

World War II: Frontline Command

Format: F
Publisher: Koch Med
Developer: The Bitmap Brothe
Origin: U
Release: M

The Bitmaps' battlefield strategy title finds a new publisher with plans to create an ongoing franchise







The amount of screen furniture is entirely optional, which reflects the versatility of an interface that offers all manner of ways to control your troops. And with base-building entirely removed from the equation, such versatility will be crucial to facilitating tactically complex encounters, which should distinguish this from the competition





Environments are as technically accomplished as you'd expect, but probably the most important facet of the battlefield is the Fog of War and Line of Sight systems, as well as a rudimentary representation of audio cues to simulate the claustrophobia of period military encounters



Extending the theatre of war

Though The Bitmap Brothers has yet to complete the first instalment, the developer's already hoping to extend the *Frontline Command* franchise across other time periods and different geographic regions. Apparently the game engine and development tools are versatile enough for it to be a relatively simple task to generate the content for, for example, recreations of the War in the Pacific, or more recent conflicts like Vietnam. And though the current political climate might make wargames a slightly sensitive topic, The Bitmaps can hardly be blamed for current geopolitical instabilities.

Originally scheduled to appear as a Codemasters title, *Frontline Command* was in fact dropped las year in favour of a similarly historically-theme RTS by Russian developer, 1C. Fortunately for the Bitmap Brothers, Koch Media steppe in to take over publishing duties. And while it too early to say which publisher will be vindicated by the commercial success of the respective titles, the Bitmap effort is currently looking reasonably promising; aiming for historical authenticity and tactical complexity instead of the protracted base-building that seems to be going out of RTS fashion.

In terms of interface – an essential issue any RTS – *Frontline Command* is looking highly polished, featuring context-sensitive mouse commands, a full complement of orthodox keyboard shortcuts and an easily manipulated camera. A 3D Line of Sight system and a claustrophobic Fog of War evoke the panic of urban combat, although officers equipped with binoculars can see int the gloom, and auditory cues represented by icons denote the position of enemy forces.

Although reinforcements can arrive durin missions (depending on the mission's exact nature), there's none of the conventional unit creation that is characteristic of other RTS titles. As a result, there is a shift in focus of combat tactics, which can include calling in air strikes or entering buildings in order to se up ambushes.

Budding generals will also have to negotiate the finer points of a morale system and an apparently adaptive AI. But perhaps the most interesting feature of the game is th way in which the outcome of early missions affects the course of subsequent ones. The game is broken down into five different mission blocks, each of which are made up o five inter-related missions that span the D-da preparations of 1944 through to Hitler's Eagle's Nest in the Bavarian Alps in 1945. Indeed, period detail runs throughout, from the 23 authentic units to cut-scenes that feature archive footage. Ten multiplayer maps round off the package, although the 25 singleplayer maps can also be played by up to four players, who can choose to play as either the Axis or Allied forces.

It's difficult to spot any obvious flaws at this stage, although it remains to be seen whether Codemasters' decision will turn out to be a source of regret. In any case, by the time the Russian-coded World War II rival gets its debut at E3, *Frontline Command* will already be in the hands of gamers.

IndyCar Series

Format: **PS2, Xbox, PC**
Publisher: **Codemasters**
Developer: **Brain in a Jar**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **Spring**
Previously in **E**113, **E**120

Playable PS2 code suggests Brain in a Jar is out to prove to the gaming community that it can mix it with the big boys at the front the videogaming racing grid

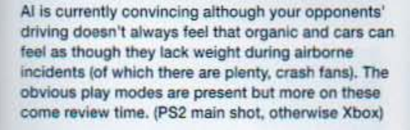








AI is currently convincing although your opponents' driving doesn't always feel that organic and cars can feel as though they lack weight during airborne incidents (of which there are plenty, crash fans). The obvious play modes are present but more on these come review time. (PS2 main shot, otherwise Xbox)



Keep it off the wall

On its highest difficulty setting, *IndyCar Series* has you altering the weight jacking and fuel mixture levels in realtime as your car's behaviour alters due to tyre usage and changing track conditions. Intimidated? Don't be. The game has possibly the best tutorial **Edge** has seen in a racing game, and takes you through the sport's every element.

There have been Indy games before of course. Papyrus' sim-heavy efforts intimidated all but the most committed while Sega's *Super Speed Racing* languished too far at the other end of the scale, offering too simplistic an experience.

But even in preview form, *IndyCar Series* is a far more exciting prospect than either of the above titles. Its appeal lies in the hugely involving experience on offer. To anyone outside the US, IndyCar is often discarded as a poor cousin to F1 – an assembly of inferior talent hurtling incessantly around circuits which are designed to contain the action within any spectator's viewing range. But a few minutes' play on *IndyCar Series* rapidly dispels such notions. And it's a testament to the developer's ingenuity that the intricacies of this demanding and exciting sport have been implemented so accurately.

The easy setting will have rookie players heading out on to the track feeling virtually no intimidation; zero damage and simplified controls see to that. But at the other end of the difficulty spectrum lies as fully fledged a simulation as you can expect on a console – pit strategy, full damage system, drafting, tyre degradation, fuel mixture, weight jacking, full IndyCar race rules and structure.

Constant to all three difficulty settings (Normal naturally offers a compromise between Easy and Pro) is the accessibility of the handling dynamic. Obviously, the level of complexity alters but everything (the weight of the steering, the chassis' response, etc) feels as you'd hope it would. Prolonged play may reveal unwanted characteristics but having experienced Brain in a Jar's previous work (the canned *F360 Challenge*, see **E**84), **Edge** is confident that this is an area the developer need not concentrate on any further.

And neither is the sense of speed. Which is crucial when you're averaging 215mph surrounded by 30-odd competitors. While a few graphical glitches need ironing out, the scenery currently rushes by at an impressively smooth pace. Your first laps are likely to be done in complete silence as you adapt to the velocity involved and master the technique required to negotiate the bends without ripping your wheels off against the concrete wall. But while you won't be saying much, you're likely to be grinning a lot.

True, its dedicated nature is unlikely to convert *ISS* devotees but anyone with an interest in motorsport – particularly those looking to conquer a new videogame category – should be utterly absorbed.

Giftpia

Format: GameCub
Publisher: Nintend
Developer: Ski
Origin: Japa
Release: April 25 (Japan), TBC (UK

Is Japan ready for an 'alternative' RPG? And exactly how alternative is this bright, cute little newcomer?



The game's bright fizzy design had girl gamers in mind (top). The hero meets dozens of characters throughout the game. Including robots, naturally

While western gamers may look over at Japan – with its hamster sims and dating games – and feel this is the last bastion of originality in the industry, there are some domestic developers who feel it's not going far enough. Step forward Skip – a new studio which proclaims itself bored with tired videogame concepts. True, *Giftpia* (a combination of 'gift' and 'Utopia') is an RPG, but Skip refers to it as an alternative RPG and says it's crammed with new ideas.

The action takes place on the island of Nanashi Jima (Island With No Name) and follows a young boy who misses his own coming-of-age ceremony. He must find five million units of currency to pay for a new one or remain a child forever. Earning the money involves exploring the island, chatting with its residents and performing various sub-quests. There's a local radio station playing in the background that provides weather reports and the location of various activities. The look and feel is similar to *Animal Crossing*, but the style is sharper. With vibrant primary colours and simplified shading, the environments are more Loony Tunes than manga. With one eye on the casual female market, Skip seems to be producing an informal and seamless game, based on communication and step-by-step progression. Alternative though? **Edge** needs more proof.



Each sub-quest represents a very separate gaming experience. The idea is for users to take it at their own pace, playing a little every day

Naruto 'Gekito Ninja Taisen'

Format: GameCub
Publisher: Tom
Developer: TB
Origin: Japa
Release: April 11 (Japan), TBC (UK

Another developer discovers the joys of cel-shading. But this slick fighter may have more to offer than fluffy cartoon scamps

Based on one of the most popular manga and anime licences in Japan at the moment (the 15 volumes have shifted around 18 million copies), *Naruto* is a fighting game which is centred around the adventures of a young boy who wants to become a ninja. Staying true to its roots, the game employs crisp, stylish cel-shading and, like *Auto Modellista*, extends the effect to include such anime touches as white strips indicating air flow and speed. Moves such as dash, double jump, rear jump and strafing are accompanied by kicks, punches and special ninjutsu actions on the A and B buttons. In the beginning there are no combos – players can simply just jam the same button repeatedly if they want to draw out the more impressive moves. More complex strings become available later. There's also an extremely devastating special move on the Z button which can only be performed when the 'Chakura Gauge' is on maximum power. In addition to this, you can pick up your enemies and throw them using Y. The developer really has succeeded here in achieving a cool, mature look with its use of a now horribly over-familiar visual effect, banishing far too many **Edge** memories of cute cartoon animals. Whether or not this is best applied to yet another fighting game contender is really another question altogether.



Super special moves (above) require a full power gauge. As usual this is filled by landing successful hits on the opponent. Oddly, Tomy is refusing to divulge the identity of the game's developer



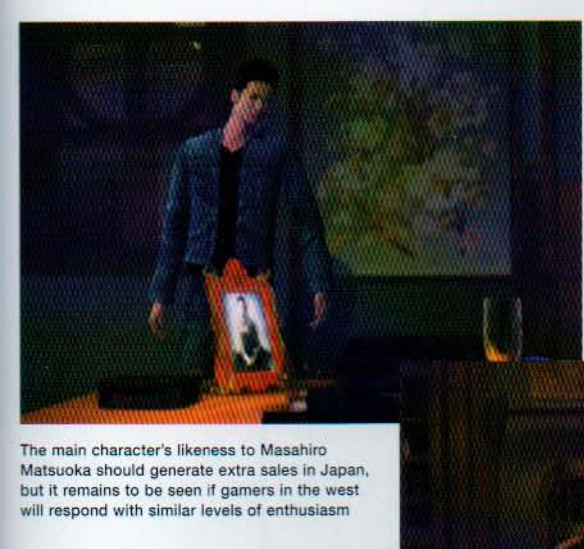


Speed lines and motion blur are just two of the anime-style effects employed by *Naruto* to accompany its cel-shaded character designs

Garasu no Bara

Format: **PS2, GC**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **Autumn (Japan), TBC (UK)**

More stylish survival horror from Capcom this time combining boy band members with mind-reading murder mystery



The main character's likeness to Masahiro Matsuoka should generate extra sales in Japan, but it remains to be seen if gamers in the west will respond with similar levels of enthusiasm

Capcom it seems is determined to become the Hammer Horror of videogames, churning out thrillers at a startling rate. The latest is *Garasu no Bara* – or *Glass Rose* – a heavily stylised 'psychological suspense adventure' based on the hit Japanese TV mini-series. In a move reflecting Capcom's approach with *Onimusha*, the game's hero is modelled on a real star – Masahiro Matsuoka – drummer with boy band Tokio, and the lead in the original series.

Seemingly a cross between *Biohazard* and Tecmo's *Fatal Frame*, this is a more cerebral than blood-and-guts yarn. The lead character is a detective investigating the murder of a family that took place in the '20s. Conveniently, he is able to look into the hearts of other characters to learn the true emotion behind their words.

As the screens show, the game has an interesting visual style, using lavish special effects – including a gorgeous sepia tone for the '20s scenes. This is obviously the key hook behind *Glass Rose*, and with Matsuoka-san on board to provide his voice *and* visage, Capcom is clearly hoping to woo the same hip adolescent demographic so impressed by the use of Takeshi Kaneshiro and Yusaku Matsuda in *Onimusha 1 and 2*. Mind-reading drummer detectives, then. You can't say Capcom is afraid to try new things.





The visuals reflect the unnerving mood of the game, and *Glass Rose* is more likely to build the horror around creating tension than quick thrills

Ghost Master

Format: **PC, Xbox, PS2**
Publisher: **Empire Interactive**
Developer: **Sick Puppies**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **Summer**

Previously in **E**110, **E**115

While it may not include Mr Claypole, Ghost Master has a splendid premise which is beginning to materialising into something much more coherent





Each ghost that is laid to rest in one level can be used in another. More elaborate scenarios – such as a sunken ship – have yet to be revealed



Mortals can not be directly controlled – it's up to the player to influence them to perform a number of tasks to complete the goal-led missions

Halloween came and went. No sign of *Ghost Master*. Christmas came and went. Still no sign of *Ghost Master*. Now scheduled in for a summer release (PC version), **Edge** remains sceptical of its apparition. Playable code, of four of the game's levels, indicate that everything is beginning to come together, but as with all *Sims*-style games, *Ghost Master* will live or die by the last five per cent of code. **Edge** is happy to wait.

There's less of a sandbox element to the game than *Sims* fans might be hoping for, but then it's not entirely fair to compare *Ghost Master* to Will Wright's cash-cow. Each scenario provides the player with a set of objectives to achieve. Mostly, these consist of 'laying to rest' ghosts trapped on the Earthly plane, although players can also look forward to putting the willies up mortals.

The camera, controls and general presentation is smooth, though not every ghostly power is yet working. What's most appealing is the fact that each problem can be tackled in two or three different ways. Need to disturb bones trapped in the chimney? You can influence a mortal to light a fire or begin rattling chains on the roof until someone investigates. Simple pleasures Sick Puppies promises will get more cerebral and intricate as the game progresses.

Prescreen Alphas This month's announcements and updates...

Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow

Format: Game Boy Advance
Publisher: Konami
Developer: In-house





Not much in the way of details yet but **Edge** is expecting another splendid 2D Dracula-themed adventure from Konami's popular franchise. Better get that SP battery charged up...

Hulk

Format: PS2, Xbox, GC
Publisher: Vivendi Universal Games
Developer: TBC





Unlikely to veer too far from the generic, but keeping Banner's anger in check will be necessary to complete stealth sections, which might just make things a bit more interesting

Wing Commander Prophecy

Format: Game Boy Advance
Publisher: Take 2
Developer: Raylight Studios



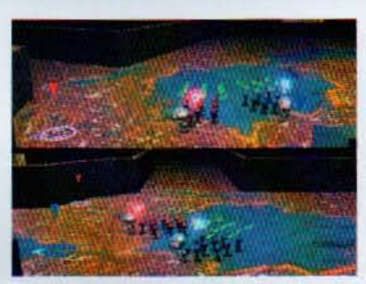


Wing Commander moves from PC to GBA, which means that Mark Hamill's voicing skills won't be needed, but should ensure that all efforts are expended on the gameplay

Pikmin 2

Format: GameCube
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house





So, a popular Nintendo game character is joined in a sequel by his brother. Hasn't that been done before? The twoplayer mode is certainly intruiging, shame about the muddy screenshots

Kirby Air Ride

Format: GameCube
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house





One of the games Miyamoto-san showed off during his recent London trip but so little is known about this outside of NCL that Nintendo Europe can't even confirm the game's title

XII Stag

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Taito
Developer: In-house





Released last year in the arcade, Taito's PS2 port of its G-Net vertical shooter should be making its way on to the shelves of your favourite importer around the time you read this

Sonic Pinball Party

Format: Game Boy Avance
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sonic Team

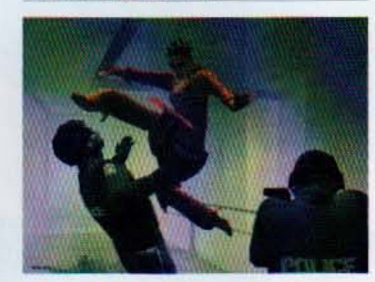




Not a conversion of the Mega Drive classic, *Sonic Spinball*, this actually features tables themed around *NiGHTS* and *Samba de Amigo* as well as an all star cast of *Sonic* characters

Enter the Matrix

Format: PS2, Xbox, PC, GC
Publisher: Infogrames
Developer: Shiny Entertainment





Ho hum – another movie licensed game. Yet present code suggests that *Enter the Matrix*'s combat might actually be tremendous and inspire twirly-wrist nonsense in the playground

Bored gamers



Illustration: Larry Bundy Jr

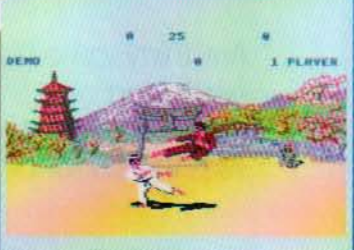


Are thirtysomething gamers really turning to gardening over Pikmin? **Edge** examines why a generation of hardcore gamers are disillusioned with the current crop of software

The golden age has passed, all the genres have been discovered, and originality is at its lowest ebb for years. Or so say an increasing number of hardcore gamers who've become disillusioned by games in recent years. **Edge**'s letters page is not the only place you'll find such sentiments. Game forums across the Internet seem to be awash with similar comments left by a generation of enthusiasts bored with the current crop of videogames. Where did it all go wrong? Are these just the grievances of a subset of thirtysomething gamers suffering from a gaming crisis, or is there something truly rotten at the heart of the industry?

The question may seem alarming, but the search for its answer raises important issues about games and gameplay that are fundamental if the medium is to mature and grow. "I personally cannot remember the last game I played right through, and yet I used to be a staunch completist," echoes **Ed Bartlett** of The Bitmap Brothers. "The primary factor is that the industry is now approaching what could be described as massmarket, and therefore 'hardcore' gamers are even more outnumbered by the 'EA consumers', who want to pick up and play the very latest sports franchise, licence or blockbuster."







Games like *Paradroid* (left) gave C64 owners a healthy dose of inventiveness regularly, and beat 'e ups like *Way of the Exploding Fist* (right) felt fresh



Purity and the beast

Avid gamers weaned on graphically primitive home computers and game consoles will always state that good graphics don't necessarily make a good game. Immediacy has always been a draw for retro gamers, but abstract visuals are perhaps an even greater attraction. Rudimentary hardware and low memory meant that graphics were often vibrant and stimulating. Crucially, this made gamers fill in the blanks with their own imagination.

Driving games have perhaps been most significantly affected by the advent of near photorealism in games - if you squint at *Gran Turismo 3*, you could almost be there, strapped to the bonnet. The gameplay is undoubtedly deep, but where are the eye-defying speeds, exaggerated comedy crashes and pick-up-and-play dynamics seen in Yu Suzuki's magical *OutRun*?

For many gamers, something that looks unreal will stimulate the mind and imagination far more than any number of war simulations ever will. A feeling of familiarity is not always a good thing in gaming, and with photorealism we generally get what we see. That's not to say that techniques such as motion capture, digitising and authentic lighting effects should be removed from videogames. There is simply a need to strike a balance between realism and fun. *Metal Gear Solid 2* is as cinematic as they come, and has a sparse stylised look yet it retains a chilling realism.

Photorealistic games like *The Getaway* (above) fail to stoke the imagination in the same way *Mercenary* (top) did in 1986

The case for the prosecution asserts that the move towards massmarket penetration has resulted in more bland and derivative titles. Yet we all know that there have been some remarkable videogames in the last two years: *Rez*, *Super Monkey Ball*, *Metroid Prime*, *Pikmin*, *Ico*, *Halo* and *Grand Theft Auto III*, to name just a handful. So where's the passion gone? Why do so many thirtysomething gamers, weaned on *Knight Lore* and *Paradroid* find games soulless and boring in the 21st century? We must start at the beginning.

> "Games used to be rotten; frustrating things with three lives and no savepoints. Nostalgia can do a lot but it can't make you play Tir Na Nog again"

Too cool for school

Many Victorians strongly believed that play was a fruitless activity and that, if indulged in by children, it could lead to moral degeneration. Fortunately, the field of child development has been particularly fervent in the last century and psychologists such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner have done much to emphasise the importance of play as a fundamental tool in the mental and social growth in children and young adults. Controversial work conducted by Mark Bekoff and John Byres has even put forward the theory that play has evolved to build big brains.

But what happens once the school gates are left behind? Do individuals indulge in play less as they get older? Research suggests not. Although the nature of play alters over time, Vivian Gussin Paley ('You Can't Say You Can't Play') found that it doesn't decline but just gets institutionalised into sports, fitness and other forms of entertainment. One theory asserts that children use play as a role-playing tool, a way of building the social 'scaffolding' that will help them interact in adulthood. Symbolic play ('I'm the hero, you are the monster') begins to fall away in teenage years and is replaced by more formalised, cerebral and physical pursuits. And while no one can prove that play remains as vital in adults, studies indicate that leisure activities, such as team sports and social gaming, can help maintain and build upon the social skills learned as a child and help foster a balanced perspective on life.

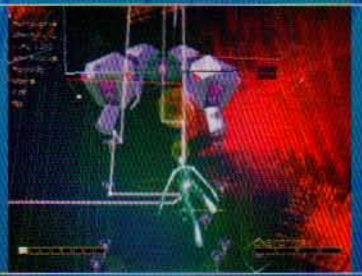
Perhaps societal values are partly to blame. Whereas sports and fitness are considered to be worthwhile pursuits, *EverQuest* is not. Chess triggers the same executive functions in the brain as *Command & Conquer*, but one is seen as a noble cerebral game, the other is, well, just a game. Pressure to conform from spouses, family and the value system that underpins our part of the world shouldn't be underestimated either. While it may be okay to fiddle with a joypad once in a while, grey-haired hardcore gamers are, perhaps, a dying breed.

Food for thought

Studies into play have tended to focus on role-playing (in children) and physical activities (in adults). Most research into the



Ico (left) and *Rez* (right) are proof that games can still be inventive and fun. But have too many derivative titles flooded the market?





Counting the cost

The pricing of game software has become a sensitive issue in recent months, kick-started by the FairPlay campaign. Some argue that games offer more value for money than ever before, others believe that this ignores changing market conditions. There are hundreds of derivative titles on the shelves and only the games that catch the mainstream consumers eye make a profit

Year	Average price of a console game	Average price of a computer game
1980	£20	£5
1985	£25	£8
1990	£50	£20
1995	£45	£30
2000	£40	£35



Halo (left) may offer more bang for your buck than *Alien Storm* (right) but the market has changed considerably over the last decade. Some argue that a lack of innovative titles and a burgeoning second hand market is seriously harming the industry

effects videogames can have on individuals has tended to focus on the negative aspects, such as aggression levels and addiction. However **Mark Griffiths**, professor of Gambling Studies at Nottingham Trent University, is keen to point out the beneficial effects videogames can have on children and adults alike, "Research dating right back to the early-'80s has consistently shown that playing computer games – irrespective of genre – produces increases in reaction times, improvements in hand-eye coordination and raises players' self-esteem."

There should be absolutely no shame in turning into a grey-haired gamer. Other research strongly suggests that mental stimulation can offset the effects of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Most studies show that an adult's craving for mentally stimulating games increases with age, rather than the reverse. Indeed, researchers at Case Western Reserve Medical School in Cleveland compared the leisure time activities of more than 550 people; nearly 200 of whom went on to develop Alzheimer's. They found that those who had engaged in stimulating activities throughout their life – everything from reading, doing crossword puzzles, and playing bridge, chess, or board games were two and a half times less likely to get Alzheimer's. Furthermore, reports in the 'Journal of the American Medical Association' stated that mind games, such as chess and computer strategy games, can help prevent atrophy of brain tissue.

A time to die

Games used to be rotten; frustrating things with three lives and no savepoints. Nostalgia can do a lot, but it can't make you play through *Tir Na Nog* again. Magnificent in its day, now it's a colour-clash recipe for a sore head. So why do hardcore gamers hanker after the past so much? Partly it's that Proustian association: we see Monty Mole's pixellated snout and are transported back to a period when all hopes and dreams seemed beautiful and possible.

Back then we used to play more games, too. And we used to finish them. Hardly surprising when you consider that most titles were coded in about 15 weeks and were crammed into 48k. Finish games? Now that's a little disingenuous. Publishers knew that gamers would be dissatisfied with a 'game


Moon Cresta (left) and Commando (right) were typical of many '80s games in that they had a looping structure to keep players happy for longer

Structural integrity

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to game length, but it's clear that many of today's games lack that essential immediacy of old. Just consider the number of games which require you to endure a tedious tutorial before you can even get stuck in – no wonder we put so many on a must-try-again-later pile to gather dust. Overly complicated interfaces and button configurations don't help matters. Leave a game for a few days and going back can seem like a burden rather than a pleasure. It's also mystifying to see so many titles that fail to even let you alter something so simple as the y-axis.

But the most galling phenomenon in modern game design has to be length for length's sake. Characters backtracking through caverns measureless to man, racing games with only two tracks available for the first five hours of play and platform games that only bestow special powers to the hero after he's collected a thousand dumblebum sweets, or some such thing.

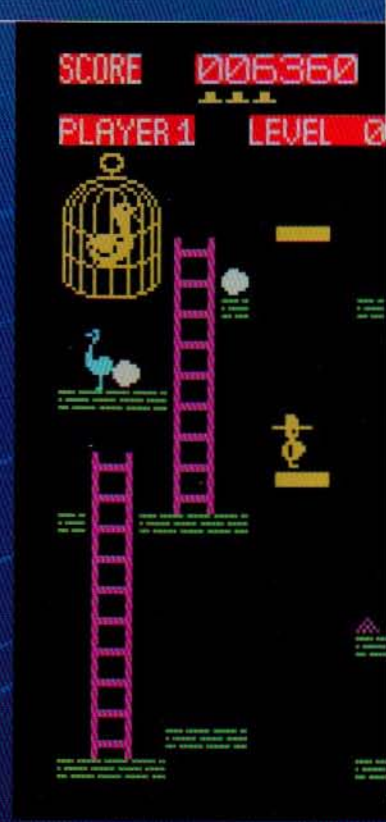
While **Edge** recognises that many games motivate players by holding off rewards, it's disheartening to see how many titles get the balance all wrong. Crucially, it shouldn't just be the attainment of the reward that is satisfying, but the journey itself. Knowledgeable gamers can spot an artificially stretched out adventure a million pixels away (*Shadow Man*, you know who you are). How much more refreshing would it be to find games that allowed you unfettered access to nearly every major gameplay component from the beginning, simply because the design was integrated and self-assured. In narrative games this is unworkable but other titles, such as *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball* should become an inspiration to the industry.


Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver was inventive but many players gave up mid way through due to the endless corridor wandering

over' screen after half-an-hour, so games were made to loop. *Chuckie Egg*, *Commando*, *Moon Cresta*, *Phoenix*, *Arcadia* et al: you could never 'finish' them. What has fundamentally changed is the amount of time you have to invest in a game to play it satisfactorily.

Games used to be short and sweet and it was possible to have a quick blast before tea-time. The blinkered pursuit of 'value for money' games has resulted in an industry producing overblown epics with an hour's play inbetween every save point. Even narrative-based games with good save structures fall down because gamers come back a few days later and haven't a clue what they are supposed to do next. How many games have you shelved half way through because you couldn't be bothered spending time retracing steps to pick up the breadcrumb trail?

What's more, thirtysomething gamers have more demands on their leisure time. Family, friends, child care and an influx of new media channels all eat into valuable leisure time. Screen Digest found that the average Briton spends 53 hours per week consuming media, making it by far the largest use of leisure time. However, only one and a half hours per week are spent playing leisure software, compared to TV (25.1 hours) and radio (21.3 hours). Even given that an individual might have a one-hour window in every evening, the thought of dipping into many of today's epic games must be daunting.



"How many games have you shelved half way through because you couldn't be bothered retracing steps to pick up the breadcrumb trail?"

No more horizons

"You know the old proverb – necessity is the mother of invention?" asks **Glenn Corpes** of Lost Toys Games. "That's how it used to work. Whole games were built around some programming trick designed to overcome a hardware failing. These days it's possible to let your imagination run riot. Unfortunately, this is usually at the expense of gameplay innovation. We wouldn't want to confuse the customer now would we…"

Perhaps it's the thrill of The New that has gone. It's true that more powerful hardware facilitates ideas and allows developers to fuse existing genres together, but we are unlikely to be excited in the same way we were during the transition from 2D to 3D in the mid-'90s. Now that 3D is old news the



Mind games: *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* stimulates the same parts of the brain as chess, but it may forever be considered trivial by comparison





Chart attack

"I can't see why anyone would bother playing a game that isn't either the best in a given genre or offering something genuinely new in gameplay terms. Unfortunately, the charts seem to piss all over my theory." Glenn Corpes, Lost Toys Games

Position	Title	Publisher	Format
01	*The Sims*	EA	PS2
02	*Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance*	Midway	PS2, Xbox, GC, GBA
03	*C&C: Generals*	EA	PC
04	*The Getaway*	Sony	PS2
05	*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*	Rockstar Games	PS2
06	*FIFA 2003*	EA	PS2, Xbox, PC, PS
07	*Crash Bandicoot: Cortex*	VU Games	PS2, Xbox
08	*LoTR: The Two Towers*	EA	PS2, GBA
09	*Harry Potter: The Philosopher's Stone*	EA	PS, PC, GBA, GBC
10	*Max Payne*	Rockstar Games	PS2, XBox, PC
11	*Dancing Stage: Party Edition*	Konami	PS
12	*Harry Potter: Chamber Of Secrets*	EA	PS2, PS, PC, GBA
13	*James Bond 007... in Nightfire*	EA	PS2, GC, Xbox
14	*Dancing Stage: Euromix*	Konami	PS
15	*The Sims: Unleashed*	EA	PC
16	*IGI 2: Covert Strike*	Codemasters	PC
17	*SimCity 4*	EA	PC
18	*Treasure Planet*	Disney	PS, PS2, GBA
19	*WWE: Shut Your Mouth*	THQ	PS2
20	*Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*	Activision	Xbox, GC, PS2, PS1

Information compiled by ChartTrack (W/E February 28 2003)

industry has a new Holy Grail: the quest for photorealism (see Purity and the beast). Consumers can be easily seduced by realistic images on boxes, and such games appeal to literal-minded marketing execs, but the gameplay is often a letdown. "I don't really see what technology can do for us in that regard from here on in," agrees **Stuart Campbell**, designer of *Cannon Fodder*. "As for inventiveness being harder to come by, then yes, it is. That's not to say it's impossible to find, though. The problem is that nobody's looking for it. It sounds like intellectual snobbery to say this, but it's a simple fact – the more mainstream anything becomes, the less demand there is for innovation and imagination. The public likes more of the same. So the bigger gaming gets, the less potential reward there will be for companies in producing new ideas, and the less likely they'll be to look for them."

Significantly, rendering realistic streets of London may be a painstaking process, but it's tangible and easily communicable to a development team. Formulating deep game mechanics meanwhile requires far more talent and imagination. The move to larger teams may also play a part in a perceived lack of creativity in games. Works of art (and **Edge** makes no bones about videogames being works of art) are nearly always produced by a single creative genius. The more people involved with the formulation of a game, the less chance there is of a game with focus, vision and originality.

Conservative with a small 'c'

There's an old saying that you can't polish a turd. **Edge** would beg to differ. There are terrible games on the market and everyone knows this. But arguably, production values are higher than they've ever been. The three major platform holders, Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo have stringent quality assurance measures in place to ensure that every game reaches a certain level of 'quality' before it reaches consumers. But there's the rub. Is this just surface quality? Are gamers being beguiled by pretty visuals at the expense of rewarding play mechanics?

"The problem is compounded by the fact that when inventive games do come out – *Ico*, *Rez* et al – the massmarket ignores them," says Bartlett. "As a publisher driven by sales and stockmarket performance, what kind of games would you commission? In some respects I almost wish the massmarket would get off the bandwagon and allow us to return to making games for real gamers." Off-the-peg games that offer the same experiences over and over could soon begin to hurt the industry and drive more dedicated gamers away.







Back in the day everything glowed with a lustre, even Spectrum licenced 'classics' like Ocean's *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *Miami Vice*

Licence abuse is nothing new - Ocean's existence largely depended on peddling titles such as *Miami Vice* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* to teenagers in the '80s. What has changed is the timescale in which developers have to get their game finished and shipped. While films take roughly the same time to make as they've always done, the production length of a videogame, from beginning to end, has seen a 200 per cent increase. Making a truly outstanding licensed product is a thankless task for any developer. There are so many 'passable' film licenced games on the shelves that it's no wonder consumers become jaded when they play through, at best, a game like *Spider-Man* and, at worst, a title such as *Terminator: Dawn of Fate*. *GoldenEye*'s status as the only triple-A film licensed game is unlikely to change in a hurry.

Unsurprisingly, **Ian Livingstone**, Eidos' creative director, believes that the balance of power is with consumers and that there is hope for new IP. "Marketing helps to shape and promote a title, and business models determine budgets and risk, but it is undoubtedly the consumer who affects titles more than anything else. This cycle of console hardware has witnessed an older consumer with a desire to play games with more mature content like *GTA*, *Hitman*, *The Getaway* etc. Successful content comes as a result of adapting to the tastes of tomorrow's consumer rather than a marketing department trying to foist some out-of-date game on to yesterday's gamer."



"According to International Development Group, some 1,200 games were released in the US in 2002. This was up from 312 in 1998"

According to International Development Group, a consulting firm in San Francisco, some 1,200 games were released in the US in 2002. This was up from 312 in 1998. For every *Pikmin* there are a hundred generic firstperson shooters or derivative driving games. Is too much choice paralysing the hardcore gamer? Gamers from the C64 generation now have infinitely more disposable income and a vast array of games to choose from. In many ways, it's understandable if games don't seem anywhere near as precious and unique as they used to. Back in the '80s, with only a limited amount of pocket money and just one computer or console to indulge in, the playing of an anticipated title really was something to be savoured. So is it that which has been lost?

The price is right?

Although the price of console games has not drastically altered in the last ten years (see Counting the cost), the videogame landscape has. There are more gamers than there's ever been, but attachment rates are lower than they were five years ago (see 'The State of Play Nation' **E**120). It seems self-evident that consumers disappointed with a game at £40 will be less likely to go back and experiment on something less mainstream. A growing secondhand market has also emerged, with retailers, not publishers, pocketing all the profit from games that are recycled among existing consumers. Only a handful of hits make a small number of companies a profit, and this in turn has led to risk averse publishing.

"There will always be new ideas," believes **Simon Byron** of Bastion PR. "But new ideas are rarely successful, and in these increasingly tough times it's difficult to justify



From clockwise: *GoldenEye*, *Terminator: Dawn of Fate* and *Spider-Man*. Licencing is even more vital to publishers in today's hit-driven climate

There's no question that *Star Fox Adventures* delivers a lush universe, but the constant re-use of puzzle mechanics can get wearing after extended play





the risk. I do feel the hardware manufacturers have a duty to continue to innovate - and I'm pleased to see the likes of EyeToy and *Ico* being pushed by Sony. Microsoft and Nintendo could try harder; particularly the latter in Europe - the decision to omit *Animal Crossing* from its European release schedule was disgraceful."

Price certainly does seem to deter consumers from experimenting. Here's a thought: individuals new to gaming don't know, or care what games used to cost. They just see that a DVD or music CD costs in the region of £15. At £40, a videogame will never present an impulse purchase to the general punter. This has placed an unhealthy pressure on developers to make games longer, giving consumers 'value for money' (see Structural integrity). The value for money argument seems very specious indeed. How many people actually finish games anymore? Research needs to be conducted in this

Magic moments

It's not all bad news for discerning gamers. There have been a number of titles released in the last two years capable of rekindling that old gaming passion. **Edge** selects ten of its favourites.

Pikmin
Boasting characterisation in spades, *Pikmin* is as surreal a take on the resource management game as you could possibly envisage. It was suffused with brilliant moments and its oft criticised short length only left fans gagging for more.

Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball
What's the point of games? Collecting all the coins, shooting all the bad guys, travelling to Hell and back? Tecmo's lovingly crafted island adventure forgets about mission goals and just lets you enjoy a vast range of relaxing and engaging activities.

Super Monkey Ball
Many titles add in a few mini-games as motivational bonuses. But *Super Monkey Ball*, and its sequel, includes them as deep and rewarding games in their own right. Edge is still obsessively trying to get the magical 300 in Monkey Bowling.

Metroid Prime
A game that drips atmosphere. Samus' new adventure is a gorgeous piece of work which is deftly structured and supremely balanced. Part of the appeal lies not in rushing through to complete it, but in exploring every beautiful facet of the gameworld.

Rez
Not just an artistic masterpiece, *Rez* is a exceptionally well engineered shoot 'em up in its own right. It may not be the hardest game to 'complete' but true closure only comes to the hardcore gamer willing to explore its depths for those elusive 100 per cent enemy destruction rates.

Halo: Combat Evolved
There is something holy about Bungie's epic sci-fi videogame, and **Edge** doesn't mean its moniker. The feeling of immersion and involvement is unmatched on the next-gen consoles and the cohesive beauty of the multiplayer experience, especially the simple joy of optional vehicular combat, is utterly refreshing.

Ico
A jaw-dropping experience owing to the interaction between the title character and the waif-like Yorda, *Ico* is a product of beauty and unequivocal confirmation that games are an artform. The beautiful feeling of isolation means that for once the PS2 Emotion Engine tag does not seem inappropriate.

Vib Ribbon
A bizarre mutating polygonal rabbit skipping along a wire to music forms the minimalist basis for this highly enlightening title. Simple basic controls mask a depth of gameplay only limited by the extent of your personal CD collection. An unforgettable and unfathomable slice of abstract coding.

Luigi's Mansion
As cogent a paradigm of a true next-gen Nintendo title you are likely to encounter, the implementation of a novel control dynamic supplements a wonderfully stylised aesthetic that melds cartoon-quality graphics and a unique sonic atmosphere to provoke an honest sense of wonder in the player.

GTA: Vice City
Rockstar's sprawling opus represents the pinnacle of virtual crime capers. Ten hours of BGM is the icing on the cake of a videogame that incorporates so many beautiful touches, such as the purchasing of properties to supply an income, liberating helicopter travel and unparalleled freeform gameplay.



■ *Pikmin*

■ *Halo: Combat Evolved*



■ *DoA Xtreme Beach Volleyball*

■ *Ico*



■ *Super Monkey Ball*



■ *Vib Ribbon*



■ *Metroid Prime*



■ *Luigi's Mansion*

■ *Rez*



■ *GTA: Vice City*

Let's face it, you wouldn't seriously swap your GameCube for a NES, would you? Though games have improved markedly over the years, the ratio of fresh triple-A titles to averageware is arguably worse now than it's ever been





And some not so hot property. From clockwise: *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance*, *Star Wars The Clone Wars*, *James Bond 007... in Nightfire*, *Turok Evolution*, *Racing Evoluzione*. The number of stultifyingly average titles flooding the market is turning a generation of players off games











area, but there's growing concern in the development community that general consumers don't have time to complete 40-hour plus games.

"Most games are too long," asserts **Shahid Ahmad** of START! games. "It's not just about gamer apathy, though that certainly exists. People do have a lot of leisure time – it's just that we choose to fill it with a huge array of activities. Our options for self and group expression are almost endless. Videogames have to compete with hundreds of cable and satellite TV channels, music, magazines, books, videos, cinema, DVDs, physical pursuits, holidays, hanging out with friends, instant messaging, text messaging, telephones, emails and the gym. And that's just the tip of the iceberg."

Bland ambition

A review conducted by Mindbranch found that an increasing number of adults are taking a 'having-it-all' approach to their leisure time. Instead of indulging in one or two pastimes, we are attempting to cram as many leisure experiences in as possible. While videogames are not a priority to mainstream consumers, hardcore gamers seem to be ever more dissatisfied by the number of average titles that are being released every month. Diversity is not being championed any more. It's true that the videogame industry is accumulating more profits than ever before, but many companies are failing to judge the market with any success.

Depressingly, the hardcore gamer no longer seems to be a target for many publishers. And rare is the game that manages to capture the imagination of the mainstream consumer and the dedicated gamer alike. Focus grouping is becoming more prevalent and carpet bombing consumers with titles aimed at Everyman is a worrying trend. *Spider-Man*, *Star Wars The Clone Wars*, *Medal of Honour Frontline*, *Racing Evoluzione*, *James Bond in... Nightfire*, *Minority Report*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Turok Evolution*, *Red Faction*, – the list could go on and on – may generate short-term profits, but leave most discerning gamers with an existential lack of sense and purpose in their gaming lives.

There can be no definitive answer to this issue, but the industry has a duty to serve hardcore and mainstream gamers alike. A lack of diversity could see the generation of gamers raised on the NES and Mega Drive leave for other more 'engaging' pursuits. There's certainly a danger that if money isn't invested in new IP and ideas, then the hit-driven nature of the market will only get worse. Major publishing houses are already merging their businesses to heal the wounds of a troubling 2002. **Edge** expects such consolidation to lead to an even more conservative outlook on the market.

More importantly, now that there are 1,200-plus titles being released every year, the specialist press must also play a part in championing the games that are worthy of our attention at the expense of massmarket fodder. One can but hope.

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This is

At a time when many gamers are looking at their hobby and questioning its relevance to their lives, Edge looks at 50 of the titles that brought them this far – and how, crucially, they did it...



Hardcore

As **Edge** considers the reasons behind the malaise affecting even the most concerted videogamers today, it's time to look at a broad selection of the titles whose values define what extreme electronic entertainment is about. It is about many things, of course, but over the next eight pages you'll find examples of the form that exemplify it at its most compelling.

These are experiences whose nuances – for varying reasons – have ensured their extreme popularity – whether they're coin-ops from the '80s (and there are quite a few of those) or something more contemporary on Xbox.

Just why, exactly, did we spend literally hundreds of pounds to better our skills on games such as *Shinobi* and *R-Type*? Why does a game like *Dragon's Lair* appear in a list such as this? And what is the common bond between puzzle games, RPGs and shoot 'em ups?

You'll find much of the evidence here, but you will end up drawing your own conclusions about what makes a videogame transcend the category of 'entertaining diversion' and enter the box marked 'obsessive pursuit'.

They all have something in common, of course: they turn us into idiots. Idiots whose pastime will probably never be understood by those on the other side of the fence, looking in.

Getting them to play a few of these games might be a good step in the conversion process...

"What kept gamers coming back was the lust to experience its audiovisual extravagances"



OutRun

Arcade ▪ Sega ▪ 1986

In the arcade scene of the mid-'80s, a time of massive technological breakthroughs on the coin-op scene, *OutRun* was videogame pornography. It had everything: a hydraulically-powered cabinet, sex appeal (you drove a soft-top Ferrari Testarossa whose passenger seat was occupied by a Californiaesque blonde), Sega's thunderingly quick sprite-scaling engine (previously seen in *Space Harrier*), and perhaps the most evocative soundtrack ever conceived for an arcade game. This combination ensured its immediate impact, but there was also a beautifully engineered driving challenge to go with it.

Today, the only way you could replicate the leap *OutRun* made from the games that preceded it would be to create a driving game with true, actual photorealistic visuals. Yes, in its day it really was that much of a step forwards.

It wasn't particularly difficult to finish the game. However, another innovation *OutRun* offered was the opportunity to make your own way to the finish line. Each stage ended with a fork in the road and it was up to you to decide whether you wanted to head out to the desert or follow a more scenic route taking in windwills and trees in blossom.



OutRun's vibrant cool was a significant part of its appeal. Everything screamed 'sunshine'

So that's what kept gamers coming back: the lust to once more experience *OutRun's* audiovisual extravagances and to try out a different route to the goal – as well as another of the game's six different (and often whimsically comical) end sequences – and soak up that sunset as you put your name into the hi-score table.

Gamers' initial reaction: "You can choose the music on the car stereo! *You can choose the music on the car stereo!*"

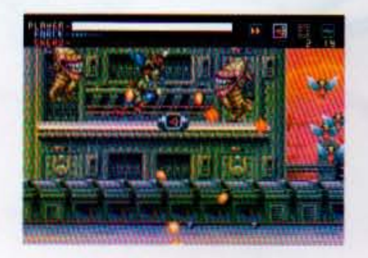
Gamers' view after a week: "You're *still* listening to 'Magical Sound Shower'? I've moved on to 'Passing Wave', myself."



Advance Wars

GBA ▪ Intelligent systems ▪ 2001

Still the most compulsive and enduring of the GBA specific titles, *Advance Wars* begins at a pedestrian pace by positively demanding that you stroll through the basics at a snail's pace. All this provides good grounding for the game proper where inadequate training would almost certainly result in a sound trumping. Once completed, the incentive is still there to try to attain the top ranking in every mission to unlock all the secret characters and areas.



Alien Soldier

Mega Drive ▪ Treasure ▪ 1995

Treasure's theory was that if the high point of any action game is reaching the boss, then why not make a game entirely filled with bosses. As such, it removed the traditional pacing that our gaming education had prepared us for. There are no moments of respite in *Alien Soldier's* 25 levels. The player constantly tries to psych out boss techniques, and battling with the *Gunstar*-on-acid control system is an achievement in itself. One of the hardest games of all time.



Bakuretsu Muteki Bangaioh/ Bangai-O

N64, DC ▪ Treasure ▪ 1999

At first glance this action game looks like a throwback to the era of fruit power-ups and pixel length sprites although the functional yet endearing visuals allow for obscene levels of action. Sidestepping any pigeonholing with skill, *Bangai-O* settles into its own peculiar niche. A title any hardcore gamer should have completed, the DC version is tougher than the N64 although the final level of both iterations is nothing short of painful.



Card Fighters Clash

NGPC ▪ SNK ▪ 1999

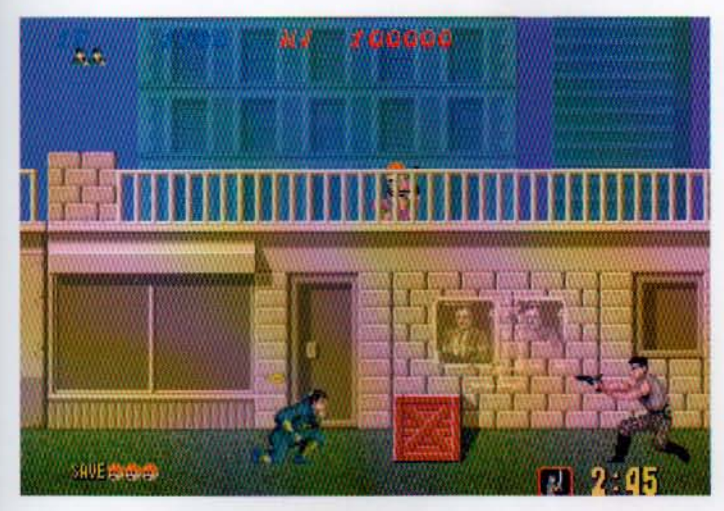
It's not desperately difficult to finish. Put the hours in and you'll see the credits roll – but you gotta catch 'em all. This is *Pokémon* for the serious gamer, with the basic instinct but without the basic gameplay. An ingenious card game grabs you by the collar and demands you find all the cards and finish the game. Released in SNK and Capcom editions, the fact that hardcore players recognise respective companies' characters helps immeasurably.



Chrono Trigger

SNES ▪ Squaresoft ▪ 1995

It's not quite clear what makes an RPG hardcore but if quality completism is your thing then *Chrono Trigger* has been tailored for you. One innovation is that the final boss can be visited at any time to complete the game, granting one of 13 endings depending on how much you leave unresolved in the world. Achieving the 100% ending is not easy. But unlike traditional RPG fare, it's extremely enjoyable time-travelling, righting the wrongs of the generations.



Shinobi

Arcade ▪ Sega ▪ 1987

We were obsessed with ninjas in the 1980s, and video releases such as 'Sakura Killers' were accompanied in arcades by games like *Shinobi*; part Taito's *Rastan Saga*, part super-polished clone of Namco's *Rolling Thunder*. Compared to other big hitters of the day, notably *Final Fight*, Sega's game was a precise experience, progress always dictated by lightning-quick manipulation of its controls and never impeded by wave upon wave of lumbering, unblockable opponents.

But it was the grace with which you could play *Shinobi* that became its hallmark. You could dispatch enemies with skilfully flung shuriken, of course, but how much more satisfying would it be to take them on at close quarters and disable them with a slash of your blade? To the untrained eye, such gameplay looked horrifically audacious. But to the expert player, it was what would bring him back tomorrow.



Several different special attacks existed, but only noviciate players relied upon their use



One of *Shinobi*'s distinctive touches: was this a nod towards Spider-Man? It was never clear

Gamers' initial reaction: "How are you supposed to kill the scuba ninja blokes?"
Gamers' viewpoint after a week: "What? You *still* haven't perfected the bonus stages?"



"It was the grace with which you could play *Shinobi* that became its hallmark"



Cosmic Smash

Arcade, DC ▪ Sega Rosso ▪ 2001

Edge was right to say that a skilled player may complete this on their first attempt, but this *Space Invaders* meets squash arcade venture was always about the subtlety of high scores. When you start to take the more demanding routes through the game (the only way you'll get anywhere near the web-based world leaderboard) it begins to exert its considerable weight on you. Not nearly as hooky as some of the games here, it can still hold a spell over the hardcore.



Cyber Troopers Virtual-On Oratorio Tangram

Arcade, DC ▪ Sega ▪ 1998

Unlike so many of the hardcore arcade games listed here, *VOOT* restrains itself from instantly beating the virgin player into credit submission. Rather, one is led into a false sense of security. Competent players surge through the first couple of stages with relative ease only to be shown the extent of gaps in their skills in subsequent rounds. The deadly game of mech hide and seek is distinctly Japanese and all the more niche for it.



Daisenpuu/Twin Hawk.

Arcade, MD ▪ Taito/Toaplan ▪ 1989

This is the epitome of the old-skool vertical shooter; classic WWII fare replete with *1942*-esque visuals. It's unfortunate that most of today's players will have only played this on MAME and never experienced the thrill of trying to squeeze that little bit extra from one credit. The extreme difficulty level is slightly countered by the fact that you restart at the exact point you died. The superb Mega Drive PAL conversion is a good place to start for the curious.





SMB's expert use of inertia saw it become a benchmark for platform-game development

Super Mario Bros.

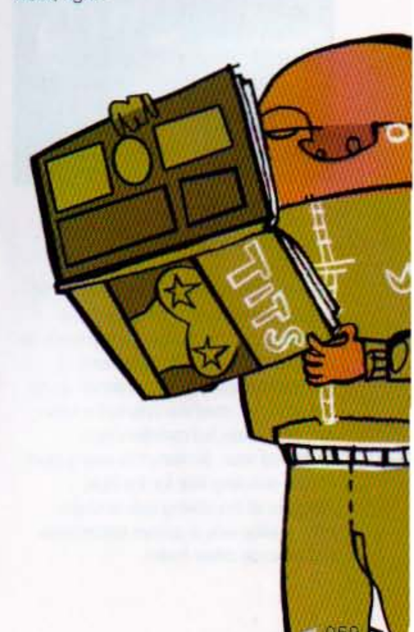
Arcade ▪ Nintendo ▪ 1986

Some people forget that *Super Mario Bros.* was also a coin-op (and, no, it wasn't powered by the same hardware that made up the architecture of the NES), but not those who made it a national arcade institution in 1986; their leaps and bounds setting a precedent for the home console boom that was kicking into gear once more.

Super Mario Bros.' appeal was threefold: its initial challenges were supremely welcoming, its secrets scarily innovative (do you remember the first time you jumped up into where the score appears – and it wasn't a bug?), and its structure thoroughly digestible (1-1 to 1-4, 2-1 to 2-4 and so on).

Interestingly, many *Super Mario Bros.* fans were girls. They became part of a close-knit community that shared tips and secrets like sweets. Fan groups such as this only ever gather around deep, bona fide classics.

Gamers' initial reaction: "So you jump on their heads... Interesting."
Gamers' viewpoint after a week: "You know about how the fireworks work, right?"





Faselei

NGPC ■ Sacnoth ■ 1999

Chances are you won't make it through the first level of Sacnoth's NGPC mech strategy-RPG. Once you run out of ammo that's really it - you are just left on the field, helpless and hopeless. Of course you soon learn to prepare but this doesn't stop *Faselei* from putting up a strong steady fight against player advancement. Two levels that require prior knowledge of what is coming let down what is otherwise a competent piece of hardcore programming.



Elemental Gearbolt

PSone ■ Alpha System/SCEI ■ 1998

While sadly never securing a PAL release, the premise of Sony's stunning lightgun game is simple: take the on-rails flying shooter template seen in *Panzer Dragoon* and *Rez* but utilise the G-Con to aim and fire. With the peripheral enabling a faster aim, items are flashed onscreen for a fraction of the amount of time usually used in on-rails shooters. Reactions must be lightening quick and the highest scores are only attainable by the truly talented.



Final Fantasy Tactics

PSone ■ Squaresoft ■ 1997

In the early days of the 32-bit era, Squaresoft was poaching the best in Japanese talent. The *Ogre Battle* team was brought in to create a version of its strategy-RPG in *Final Fantasy* clothing. The levels of strategic depth on offer are stunning. One of the few RPG games where you can reach a stage where you haven't levelled up enough yet can't go back; resulting in you restarting the experience from scratch. A beautiful and timeless hardcore game.



F355 Challenge

Arcade, DC ■ Sega ■ 1999

One can almost still feel the anguish of the DC generation. If it's a hardcore arcade racer you're after then there is no competition for *F355*. At the time of release many a driving fan strode up to the sit-down machine only to be seen scuttling away, tail between legs, moments later. Similarly this was a poor choice stocking filler for the kids. Remove all the driving aids and you soon realise why a games tester does not a racing driver make.



Gunstar Heroes

Mega Drive ■ Treasure ■ 1993

Maegawa-san's new devco, free of Konami constraints, did everything it had ever wanted to do in this, its first title. Forging one of the most timeless and imitated weapon systems, *Gunstar* never ceases to amaze. Once the player finishes the first four sections, tackled any way they please, the crux of the game begins in the fifth and final epic level. Finishing in a solitary credit is one of the most exhilarating experiences a hardcore gamer can enjoy.

"It was the desire to explore the game's each and every avenue that ensured its popularity"





Gauntlet

Coin-op ■ Atari ■ 1985

Whatever happened to cooperation? Yes, sure, today you have *Counter-Strike* and its ilk, but in 1985 the multiplayer, watch-each-others'-back premise was at its most pure with Atari's *Gauntlet*, creating a new wave of social gaming (and, cruelly, one that was not to be truly explored in arcades).

Why was it such a coin gobbler? First, it presented itself as a multiplayer pursuit in which the participants were not faced off against one another. And unlike previous fourplayer coin-ops, it did not ask its users to face each other over a tabletop-style unit (see Bally's *Demolition Derby* or Sega's *Hot-Rod*) but placed them instead right next to each other, and closely, thereby fostering the adventuring 'party' ethic.

Second, *Gauntlet* didn't offer 'lives'. Instead, players had health meters which could be boosted simply by dropping in some more coins. So, no longer was it a case of crapness signalling the end of participation; now, it didn't matter if you were crap so long as you had the money to take part.


The sheer number of enemies was a big draw, but the multiplayer aspect defined *Gauntlet*

Crucially though, *Gauntlet* had mystique, and its levels presented conundrums whose nuances still have longtime devotees sighing today. It was the desire to explore the game's each and every avenue that ensured it such insane popularity.

Gamers' initial reaction: "Why did you shoot the food? It said not to shoot the food!"
Gamers' view after a week: "No, *I'm* always Valkyrie."





Halo

Xbox ■ Bungie ■ 2001

In retrospect, having experienced the delirious highs of *Halo*, the core mechanics of the FPS genre seem clumsy and unsubtle. Bungie's epiphany, however, added a layer of sophistication and pacing that has rarely been seen in the genre even today, building on the foundations laid by the criminally overlooked *Marathon* series. Playing on Legendary still remains a frightening experience and then, of course, there's the multiplayer modes to battle through.



Ikaruga

Coin-op, DC, GC ■ Treasure ■ 2001

Hiroshi Iuchi, xenophobe, extreme otaku and director of *Radiant Silvergun* took the genre in another direction with *Ikaruga*. Not everyone will succeed. Determination, stubbornness and skill are all essential prerequisites for any gamer who even wants to begin to master this puzzle shooter hybrid. Its refined and assured execution ensures that the player who cares won't be deterred, but expect to see many in bargain bins come PAL release.



Jet Set Willy

C64 ■ Software Projects ltd ■ 1984

Bigger and better than *Manic Miner* in every way, Matthew Smith's legendary 'clean 'em up' has a very different approach to its pseudo forefather. The aim is for indulgent party host Willy to tidy all the objects in his mansion before bedtime under the watchful and nagging glare of maid Maria. The game is exceptionally well paced and huge. And the difficulty rises into the stratosphere towards the latter stages as exemplified in the Nightmare room.



King of Fighters '98

Arcade, Neo-Geo ■ SNK ■ 1998

The first game before SNK introduced the much maligned striker system is favoured by the best of the world players. *King of Fighters* has always required a different approach to *Street Fighter*'s accessible quarter turn mechanics. Specials and combos here take time to learn and practice to perfect and many a novice has just walked away. Watch two advanced level players and you'll wish you had put the hours in to learn an onscreen martial art.



Last Blade 2

Arcade, Neo-Geo ■ SNK ■ 1998

As far as sword-based fighters go the *Last Blade* series rules the 2D realm. The default MVS setting found in the arcades (level four) is enough to beat most fighting fans after the first few levels. If you were unlucky enough to find a cabinet set to level eight only a true master would ever get to meet the final boss. The subtlety of the *Last Blade 2*'s fighting system and distinguished pace is a fine antidote to Capcom's frenzy.



Lemmings

Amiga, Various ■ DMA Design ■ 1991

As **Edge** pointed out in The making of *Lemmings*, the game has the rare ability to appeal to hardcore and mainstream gamer alike. The simple visuals, clean and easy to comprehend mechanics and straightforward player commands were a counterpoint to the fiendish latter stages. In fact until a level is first cracked, the player wonders if they will ever find the solution. Pixel perfect collision allows for the fairness needed to ensure the title endures indefinitely.



Dragon's Lair **was hardly a good advert for interactivity, but its looks alone were enough to ensure that it attracted repeat audiences. Truly expert players were few and far between, though**





Dragon's Lair

Arcade ■ Cinematronics ■ 1983

When it comes to modern-day ridicule, there are few targets as easy as *Dragon's Lair*. But its impact on the coin-op scene should not be taken lightly because, like Princess Diana's death, every gamer remembers where they were when they first discovered Cinematronics' laser disc-powered game. Watching the visuals unfold to the accompaniment of sparkling, booming audio was an experience in itself, but actually playing the blessed thing was quite another. And that was the draw: despite thinking that you were following onscreen prompts and audio burps to the letter, you were rarely left convinced that you were ever in control or truly on top of the action. Playing it through to completion therefore was one of arcade gaming's most legendary trials, and one to which relatively few arcade goers could lay claim.

Gamers' initial reaction: Absolute gobsmacked silence.
Gamers' view after a week: "Have you seen Smithy play? He doesn't even look for the flashes!"

"Every gamer remembers where they were when they first discovered Cinematronics' *Dragon's Lair*"



"Possibly the only truly great title to come out of Japanese developer Tehkan"



Mixing *Pac-Man* and... something else entirely, *Bomb Jack*'s appeal lay in its original and super-refined gameplay. Pushing your luck in an attempt to not miss a fizzler was hellishly challenging





Bomb Jack

Coin-op ■ Tehkan ■ 1984

The 'clone wars' had died down by the mid-'80s and gamers began to see genuinely new forms of videogame emerging from the coin-op scene. One of the least trumpeted of these was also possibly the only truly great title to come out of Japanese developer Tehkan: *Bomb Jack*.

It grabbed an audience by looking cute (your character was a super-deformed Superman-style hero replete with flowing cape and the ability to fly; his enemies sinister metallic types; the backdrops lovingly-crafted and loosely based on real-world locations), sounding cute (the super-jolly musical accompaniment had possibly never been out-super-jollified), and playing... well, cutely.

But it was the opportunity of 'perfecting' each stage that had players coming back for more. Sure, it was easy enough to get through a few stages, but did you land the 50,000 bonus each time? *That* was what it was all about.

Gamers' initial reaction: "You have to collect the bombs in fizzing order? Ah, I get it now."

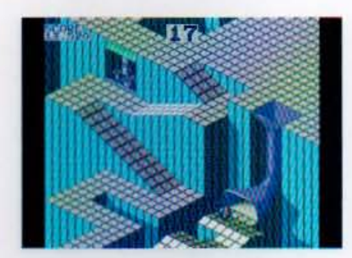
Gamers' view after a week: "If one of those mental UFOs gets me one more time I'm going to break something."



Metal Slug 3

Arcade, Neo-Geo, PS2 ■ SNK ■ 2000

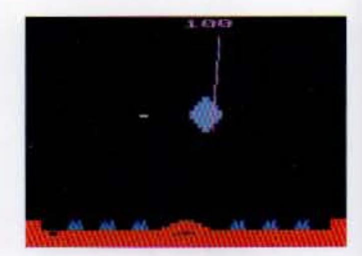
All the *Metal Slug* games are tough, especially to the true player who will attempt the one credit run. But for the third and final SNK-developed title, the difficulty is augmented by the increase in game size. While the first four sprawling levels seem par for the course, the player is constantly fooled into thinking that the fifth level is nearly over. Set piece after set piece provide the backdrops for some of SNK's wiliest tactics to part you from your 50p pieces.



Marble Madness

Arcade, Various ■ Atari ■ 1984

Put simply: roll the marble down a course as fast as possible ensuring it doesn't fall off, drop too far or run into obstacles. In practice, mastering the game meant mastering the subtleties of the track ball. The cumulative time mechanism,which dictated time left on the counter after each level, counted towards the next level. This meant there was constant pressure on the player to plan ahead. Even on intermediate level, the challenge was often demanding.



Missile Command

Arcade, Various ■ Atari ■ 1980

It's the tail end of the Cold War and the player is entrusted with protecting the Zardonian missile defenses from the nearby Krytolians. Three bases are at risk from incoming missiles, which must be shot down by the player. In the arcade, aim is handled by a trackball and the process is made harder by varied missile speeds. Sure, it's a variation on the *Space Invaders* theme but the added twists and frenzied visuals make the title that much tougher.



Mars Matrix

Arcade, DC ■ Takumi ■ 2000

It's clear which demographic Takumi was aiming for with this title. Everything about the game screams Japanese hardcore from the functional visuals to the extreme skill needed to finish just the first level in one life. You know a game is hardcore when the extras you unlock are high-score technique videos. Players who study those videos will soon realise some of the ways to play the game to get the most out of it. Definitely not for the novice shoot 'em up player.



Mr. Driller

Arcade, Various ■ Namco ■ 1999

Not hardcore in the sense that you have to be especially talented to pick up and play it but this is, put simply, gaming at its most distilled. At the arcades it was never a graphical Pied Piper, but *Mr. Driller* is far from mainstream and keeps the open-minded player coming back long after other titles have lost their glow. As with all the best hardcore titles the hook comes quickly to all while mastery (in the form of the 5000ft expert mode) is reserved for gaming's elite.



NiGHTS: Into Dreams

Saturn ■ Sega ■ 1996

The *Sonic* team really made the game they wanted to make with *NiGHTS: Into Dreams* although history shows that it was a niche title that spectacularly failed to do what Sega's executives had hoped for. Nevertheless, those who allowed themselves to be drawn, without preconception, into the beautiful dream world would not be disappointed. Successful defeat of all the nightmares, not to mention 100% completion of this title would prove too difficult for many.



Radiant Silvergun

Arcade, Saturn ■ Treasure ■ 1998

Play *Radiant Silvergun* without fully understanding the scoring system and you won't get far up the leader board. All enemies are red, blue or yellow and scoring high points involves shooting them in repeating colour order, opening up the game to new levels of complexity. The RPG-esque power-up system is yet to be bettered, and allows the player to deal with each situation as they please. Only a few Japanese players are known to have completed this in one credit.



Project-X

Amiga ■ Team 17 ■ 1992

Team 17's first title was an impressive affair utilising similar mechanics to Konami's seminal *Gradius* series. It is well documented that most people who played this title never saw past the second level. Should you complete the five main levels you were required to go on a bombing run, which had to be successfully completed to see the end credits. However, unlike the other hardcore Japanese shooters listed here *Project-X* was often cheap and unfair.



Rainbow Islands

Arcade, Various ■ Taito ■ 1987

Taito's pseudo-sequel to the puzzle *Bubble Bobble* was a completely novel affair when it was launched. The player is required to ascend the vertical levels to avoid drowning from the ever-rising tide. The sense of panic as one escapes from the water and then runs into the boss is memorable. And in addition to the tough end of level challenges, the true player must attempt to collect the gems in the correct colour in order to gain secret gems and rooms.



Puyo Puyo 4

Dreamcast ■ Compile ■ 1999

This was never a poor man's *Tetris*: a claim which was primarily made by shortsighted westerners. Instead, one must think on more than one level and dimension with this game. True Zen mastery comes from thinking several steps ahead of the game and carefully planning combos and set pieces. Most will never bother to get that far so this is the definitive hardcore puzzler. The DC iteration is the most polished of the multitude of format options.



Rick Dangerous

C64, Amiga ■ Core ■ 1989

This is flip screen 2D Lara. Each level has a safe area for the player to reach by performing a perfect sequence of actions in order to avoid sudden death. The game is of the 'try and try again' mindset and frustration is never far away as attempts on a particular section fail time after time. Despite such problems, the game really is gloriously addictive and it bears the absolute classic hardcore hallmark: simple to learn, nigh on impossible to master.



Ghosts 'n' Goblins

Arcade ■ Capcom ■ 1985

Before *Resident Evil* was ever a bad dream in its creator's bed came *Ghosts 'n' Goblins*, one of the most horrendous coin-ops ever made. Horrendous because it was so thoroughly sumptuous to look at and listen to but also so utterly frustrating to play.

The chief issue concerned Arthur Knight's particular approach to jumping: by this point, of course, we'd already become accustomed to the totally unrealistic concept of being able to move mid-air once we'd decided to take a leap and we'd decided that, "Yes, that feels just perfect, thank you very much". But a jump in *Ghosts 'n' Goblins* commited you and that was it.





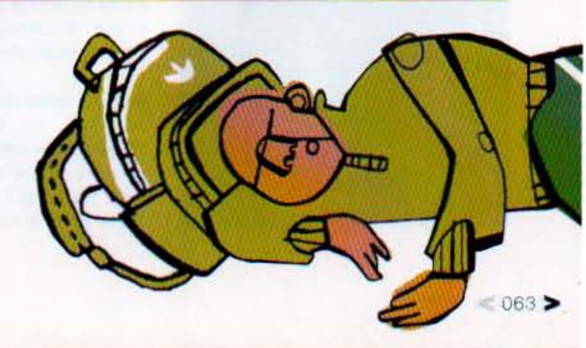
G'n'G's range of weaponry was a definite strength. Always remember: avoid the torches

It's easy to imagine that the game's developers finished their work and handed it over to playtesters, only to witness them breaking out in frequent bouts of tears and bringing it back to the studio in order to give players a second chance once they'd taken a hit (removing Arthur's armour and thereby inventing the infamous boxer-shorts iteration). Perhaps this didn't happen. Whatever the case, *G'n'G*'s fearsome nuances ensured that masochistic players always came back for more.

Gamers' initial reaction: "Ha! His armour falls off and he's wearing jocks!"
Gamers' viewpoint after a week: "I did the ice palace level! Well, actually I didn't. But I know how to do it now!"



"Sumptuous to look at and listen to but also so utterly frustrating to play"



"R-Type did sci-fi stylings and organic alien stylings like no other game before it"



Was there ever a more complete arcade shoot 'em up? Probably not: every aspect of *R-Type* fitted together like an alien jigsaw. The many games it influenced were not fit to lace its boots

R-Type

Arcade ■ Irem ■ 1987

R-Type wouldn't stand a chance today, of course. It's too tough, it's too much of a memory test. Hell, it simply wasn't that good a game in the first place (depending on which particular brand of complete idiot you happen to be listening to).

Truth is, if you weren't there, your opinion doesn't matter, because Irem's game is one of the most important in the development of the videogame form. First, it did sci-fi stylings like no other game before it. Second, it did organic alien stylings like no other game before it. Third, and





most important, it added a new dimension to a side-scrolling shooter genre that was asleep on its feet.

Which bit do you remember? When you charged up and took out the circular assembly with one shot? When you attached the pod to your rear for the first time? When you first shot it off into a boss's weak spot? It's impossible to pick a 'best' bit, because it was jammed to the gunwales with so much greatness.

Gamers' initial reaction: "Look... at... the... size... of... that... thing..."
Gamers' view after a week: "You're using the charge beam all the time, right? You're not? You should. No, don't bother with the normal shot. Really."



Samba de Amigo ver.2000

DC ■ Sega ■ 2000

Generally speaking you can either do rhythm action or you can't. Most of the good examples in this relatively new genre get especially tough at the higher end of the difficulty spectrum. *Samba* is welcoming to all, but should you start to push the game it will fight back with vengeance. The array of bonus features in this appended version add to the techniques you need to assimilate should you want to be a true *Samba* aficionado.



Shikigami No Shiro

Arcade, PS2, Xbox ■ Alpha System ■ 2002

It's rare that a shoot 'em up changes the way you play the genre but *Shikigami No Shiro* does exactly that. By boosting your firepower and score multiplier as you get closer to enemies and bullets, it forces you to dice with death. It's an innovation that elevates the game above its peers. High score table mastery provides the incentive to improve, encouraging the player to think of ever-inventive ways to boost their score.



Shock Troopers

Arcade ■ Saurus ■ 1997

This was intended to be a vertical *Metal Slug* and is distinctly reminiscent of SNK's *Ikari Warriors*. The ability to switch mid-play between characters combined with violent graphics and varied locations and set pieces make this a draw for the action arcade cognoscenti. As always, completing this title in one credit is very difficult yet the possibility of doing so will draw the player on and on in their attempts. Superior in hardcore rating to the slowdown-ridden sequel.



Sin and Punishment

N64 ■ Treasure ■ 2000

Eyebrows were raised when Treasure announced this on-rails 3D Shooter for N64. In reality the game is sublime and the feelings of control far surpass the *Panzer Dragoon* school of thought. While normal mode can be completed in one credit by the persistent, additional enemy patterns and attacks are added on harder levels. It's a game that you only feel you are getting the most from (and gaining the experience intended) when the difficulty is vamped up.



Starquake

C64, Spectrum ■ Bubblebus ■ 1984

Boasting technical brilliance, slick professionalism and all the charm of an Ultimate title, Steve Crow's second game was a master of design. Your task is to manoeuvre Blob through the 512 screens with his meagre repertoire of moves to save the planet. The key innovation was Blob's ability to lay platforms that would dissolve after a short time. This resulted in a player frenzy to reach safe ground. Old-skool western hardcore gaming at its best.



Strider

Arcade, Various ■ Capcom ■ 1989

Players who revisited this title when Capcom included it in the PSone version of *Strider 2* will have seen clear evidence that games are getting easier. While the excellent *Strider 2* will hamper the few from seeing the end credits, its esteemed forefather will take every penny you have at every opportunity it has. Insanely frustrating and anger-inducing today, the game's battery of set pieces still manages to hook the player to keep going against all the odds.



Pac-Land

Arcade ■ Namco ■ 1984

Pac-Land occupied the same realm as *Wonderboy*, *Super Mario Bros*, *Bubble Bobble* and, later, *Wardner*. In other words, it was a cute platform game. But on the face of it Namco's coin-op seemed pretty *dumb*. Its sprites were oversized, its audio was tinkly and twee, and, well, it just looked like yet another example of a company pushing an already over-milked property too far.

There was, however, a surprising amount of depth to *Pac-Land*, its subtleties only becoming evident once you'd tinkered with its distinctive environments and idiosyncracies for a number of attempts. And it toyed with platform game convention: for





Pac-Land **may have been garish, but the shocking veneer hid an innovative platformer**

example, you could only make a long leap over a pool (having jumped from a springboard) by rapidly hammering right on the joystick – a physical process that lacked grace but illustrated the kind of original thinking that went into the production of the experience.

It was the goal of unravelling all of *Pac-Land*'s foibles that brought players back. Like *Super Mario Bros*, the word of mouth that surrounded it served to feed its longevity, and it's also another game that attracted a female following.

Gamers' initial reaction: "Those graphics are cute. It's sort of like the cartoon. Yeeeah, *Pac-Man*."
Gamers' view after a week: "Yeah, the fire hydrant. What? Yeah, I *know*. But try it."



"*Pac-Land*'s subtleties only became evident once you'd tinkered with its idiosyncracies"





Super Pang/Buster Brothers

Arcade, SNES ■ Mitchell/Capcom ■ 1990

This simple and addictive game had all the charms that an early-'90's puzzler should have. Essentially a variation on *Asteroids*, the game's object is to shoot bubbles, which then divide into two smaller variations. The action is frantic and modernised by way of different gun upgrades for the player. In the US, this was marketed as a mainly rental title. As such, it's highly unlikely many saw very far into what is a very tough challenge.



Underwurlde

C64 ■ Ultimate ■ 1985

The second Sabreman game complete with new perspective and non-life threatening enemies is absolutely huge and arguably Ultimate's best. All the screens link up to form a huge maze larger than that seen in *Sabre Wulf*. Scoring is via a mixture of locations visited, enemies killed and objects collected. The only way to die is from a great fall meaning that the focus is on getting around the game as much as possible to achieve the highest score.



Viewpoint

Arcade, Neo-Geo, Various ■ Sammy ■ 1992

Despite ports to many formats, only the original arcade and Neo-Geo versions could keep up the pace intended in this isometric shooter. Extremely hard but rarely frustrating, the player is dropped straight into the deep end. The unique viewpoint coupled with the sublime soundtrack first attracts the player. Progress is tough but it obeys the fundamental hardcore rule: that failure is always your fault and never the game's.



Virtua Fighter 4

Arcade, PS2 ■ Sega AM2 ■ 2001

The *Virtua Fighter* series is a beautiful example of a hardcore game crossing into the UK mainstream. However, all the large advertising campaigns and shelf-to-shelf stocking obscure the fact that most people who buy it (at least in the west) will never really bother to taste its intricacies. This is the bastard 3D child of *King of Fighters*, not in terms of mechanics but in terms of how it sees itself. The best world players have to study, and study hard.





Have three letters ever meant so much as those that appear on *T'n'F*'s world records?

Track 'n' Field

Arcade ■ Konami ■ 1983

The most physical arcade game outside of a specialist cabinet brought a new level of competitive spirit to the coin-op scene. At first, we all had our own techniques: some would tap using fingers, others with clenched fists, and one or two would even use just one run button, wrongly believing it would suffice. It was the variety of gameplay that first ensured Konami's title a busy coin slot, and you couldn't really call yourself a player until you'd clocked it at least once. But *Track 'n' Field*'s durability stemmed from the fact that you measured progress against the time in which you could run the 100m or the distance you threw the javelin, recording new personal records each time out. The scope for improvement seemed almost infinite.

Gamers' initial reaction: "I'll never be able to do the hammer. Never."
Gamers' view after a week: "You've seen the bird on the javelin, right? Well, I *think* it's a bird..."


VECTREX
Mine Storm
04

Designer Lines

For older gamers, who grew up in an era when there were no games, the launch of the Vectrex console in the early-'80s proved a revelation. With its pioneering gameplay dynamics, graphical aesthetics and high quality sound, it was the first console to transport the experience of the arcade into the home. **Edge** looks back on a major retro collectable

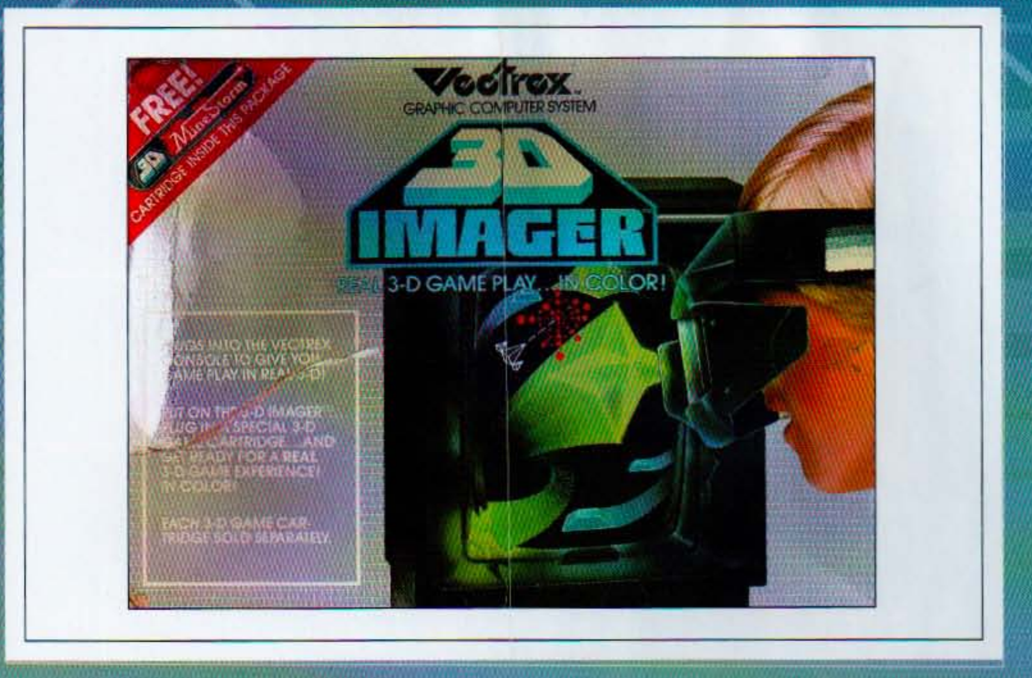
GCE's Vectrex is the only dedicated vector-based home console with a built-in-monitor. In recent times, the machine has demanded as much attention for its graphical aesthetics as for its gameplay dynamics. There are no real rivals to the Vectrex. If it's a simplistic minimalist vector glow you want to light your living room there is nowhere else to go.

That such a niche system, on the market for little more than two years, has endured in popularity right up until today says different things to different people. The truth is that systems born and nurtured before the great videogames crash around 1984 are usually nothing more than mantlepiece artefacts in today's market. Gameplay was still embryonic and the graphics today look like veritable cave scratchings. Yet the Vectrex has fared differently to its pioneering brethren and, in the last few years, interest in the system has never been so high. There are several reasons for its extreme collectability some 20 years on.

Vectrex's timing couldn't have been worse as it arrived on the doorstep of an industry about to split up. As with all companies releasing videogame systems and software leading up to the bust, profit was scarce. As such, the Vectrex enjoyed only a short time on the market with many software anomalies slipping out relatively unnoticed. The fact that so few items were released (only around 30 games made it to shop shelves) meant that the collector could feasibly complete the collection. Combine this with the scarcity of those games and it's an irresistible concoction for the hunter-gatherer. But this is a factor shared by other systems of the time; what elevates the Vectrex to premier collectable of the early-'80s are the aesthetic qualities of the system's graphics.

Opting for white vector line graphics (colour was introduced by plastic overlays), and using a vertically orientated Samsung 240RB40 vector monitor as seen in arcade machines such as *Space Wars*, *Asteroids*, *Battlezone* and *Tempest*, Vectrex is retro stylish in today's market. As a result, the visuals have remained fresh while its contemporary early sprite-based machines have aged badly.

Finally, the system has a vociferous home-coder following. At the end of its life the rights to the Vectrex and all related materials were returned to the original developer, Smith Engineering. SE then graciously condoned the non-profit circulation of any materials including games and



The 3D Imager is a highly sought after piece of Vectrex hardware selling for between £255-600. It is required to run all 363x series software. Unlike the Virtual Boy, the goggles didn't generate criticism from people complaining of headaches – because few bought them

09

90 Day Limited Warranty

GCE
A Milton Bradley Company

141001-0002 ART REV A

Vectrex
GRAPHIC COMPUTER SYSTEM
IMAGER
INSTRUCTIONS

At the time most gamers would have preferred guarantees of 3D Imager software rather than 90-day workmanship warranties. *Crazy Coaster (3D)* wasn't enough of an incentive

Homebrew

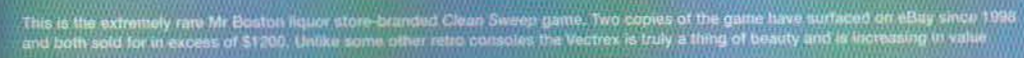
The Vectex is one of the most fan-supported systems ever. Aside from the usual emulators and Web pages, Smith Engineering's open-source policy has spawned some new games. Foremost among the Vectrex programmers is John Dondzila, programmer of the 1996 Vectrex game *Vector Vaders*. Dondzila has gone on to produce several more games, including *All Good Things*, *Spike Hoppin'* and *Patriots*. The height of Dondzila's fame came in 1999 when he produced the first 64k Vectrex game, *Vecmania*, containing several games all on one cartridge. Sean Kelly manufactures a Vectrex multicart: a single cartridge that contains almost the entire library of Vectrex games. The scene has also seen Vectrex versions of *Frogger*, *Galaxian* and *Lunar Lander* complete with digitised speech.

manuals allowing the Vectrex to become a haven for homebrew projects. These factors have ensured that the system has remained popular with enthusiasts the world over.

Much mystery surrounds the Vectrex's conception in 1980. Although many of the originators behind the launch and games have told their stories, time has misted these recollections and created differing versions of the same events from those involved at the time. In the early-'90s rumour had it that GCE president **Ed Krakauer** had been travelling in the east when an Asian businessman approached him. Krakauer was offered a warehouse of monitors at less than cost price that had been intended for use in cardiogram machines. Due to the boom in the videogame market, GCE was interested in entering at a more dedicated level. Krakauer is said to have accepted the offer and commissioned a GCE engineering team to build a console around them. However, in 2000, Steven L Kent, author of 'The Ultimate History of Videogames', interviewed **Hope Nieman**, the former marketing director of GCE, who negated this story saying, "The story about the monitors is not true… it was a real problem for us to get nine-inch monitors… so we made them in Hong Kong ourselves."

The issue became even further confused at a US classic gaming convention in late 2000 where **Bill Hawkins**, a programmer hired to make games for the Vectrex during the system's development, gave his version of events: "One of the guys who was a hardware designer, John Ross, was going around some surplus places and had come up with a little one-inch CRT that I think was used in a heads-up display for aircraft. He found it in a surplus store and brought it in thinking it would be cute to make a little handheld game that would use that. Western Technologies, being primarily a development house, rather than just develop it themselves, shopped it around. Originally, I think Kenner [known for its 'Star Wars' figures] picked up the idea and said, "Yeah, we like it, but make it a five-inch CRT.' Then they came up with a thing that looked like a Commodore PET with the CRT sitting on a little stand and the controls down there [below the CRT] and called it the Mini-Arcade. Kenner subsequently cancelled the development plans, and [Western Technologies] went and shopped it around again. GCE's Ed Krakauer said, 'We like it, but make it a nine-inch CRT.' And that's how it came about."





This is the extremely rare Mr Boston liquor store-branded *Clean Sweep* game. Two copies of the game have surfaced on eBay since 1998 and both sold for in excess of $1200. Unlike some other retro consoles the Vectrex is truly a thing of beauty and is increasing in value



Vectrex advertising was typical of early-'80s videogames branding but already system one-upmanship was creeping into the taglines



The Japanese Vectrex is perhaps the most desirable of the system variants. Distributed very poorly by Bandai in Japan it's duly the most valuable version



It was only a matter of weeks between Kenner's refusal to take up the Mini-Arcade in July 1981 and GCE's decision to run with it. GCE commissioned Western Technologies to do all the programming and design for the system. As soon as the Mini-Arcade had been taken up by GCE, Western Technologies cancelled an Atari 2600 reverse engineering project it had started in June earlier that year and moved the key staff to start work on the new console project. By January 1982 hardware design was nearing completion and GCE was anxious to announce the new console system but with no games in development, time was of the essence.

The next six months was a blur of activity and it's hard to decipher exactly what happened and who did what. Ed Smith, Western Technologies' manager of engineering, recruited technology students wanting placements. Rather than looking for local students he turned his attentions to Georgia Tech College, allegedly so any potential employee would have no distractions in Los Angeles. Bill Hawkins and Chris Kong were selected due to their experience of coding games in BASIC. Duncan Muirhead joined a week or two afterwards having dropped out of a Physics PHD program at UCLA. And so a strict timetable began demanding that the first 12 games should be ready by June 1982. By April, *Scramble*, *Mine Storm*, *Berzerk*, *Rip Off* and *Star Trek* had all been completed and the system was nearing launch.

Hoping to unveil the console at the summer CES show in Chicago, GCE was anxious to get a new name. Unhappy with the term 'Mini-Arcade' the title was then shortened from Vectron (this name even got a startup screen logo) through Vector-X to Vectrex. **Tom Sloper**, designer of the game *Bedlam* and creator of Vectrex mascot, Spike, illuminates, "We had one of those corporate brainstorming sessions with the president of GCE. We're all talking about what to call this thing. I said, 'It's a vector-based machine. Let's call it something with 'vector' in it, like Vector-X.' We made a list, put it on the whiteboard and eventually they called it Vectrex."

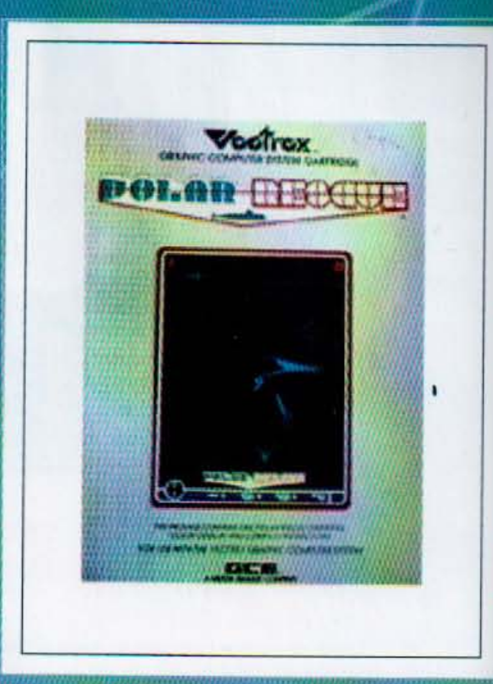
Production of Vectrex began in August 1982 and the system received critical acclaim from the videogames press of the time. Paul Newell's *Scramble* won the Arcade Award from 'Electronic Games' magazine for the best Mini-Arcade game (a category apparently founded for the Vectrex). Sales were steady despite a price point in the US of $199 (£126).

Supermarket sweep

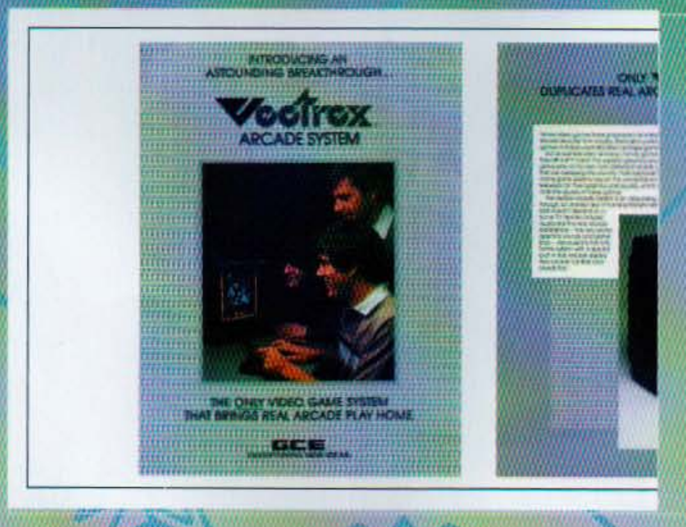
The Vectrex has always had a huge collectors scene in the US. With so many fansites it can be hard to find accurate information. One of the best fan interviews comes from **Robert Van den Heuvel**, who recalls touring the Vectrex factory in Los Angeles as a child. "I was 'awarded' a special hand-labelled version of *Minestorm* because I passed, I believe, 89 levels on the first *Minestorm*. So what I was given was really *Minestorm III*; it had several hundred levels and I was assured I'd never beat it. I was given my choice of any cartridge as a souvenir, and like a dummy I chose *Star Castle* and not *Dark Tower*, which was operational at the time. In the main offices there was a six-inch high mini-Vectrex on the president's desk, for entertaining prospective business partners when they came to visit. I am told it cost a sheer fortune to build because of the size (small components pushing the price up). It also wasn't shaped like a traditional Vectrex, but like a shoebox, with the details hidden from view. Vecto the Alien [from 'Passport' magazine] looks an amazing amount like the company president. I am told it's not a coincidental resemblance."



In 1982 GCE provided props for the atrocious film 'Android'. Two Vectrex machines were featured, one displaying the *Star Trek* game



Package design, playing on the vector theme, was less than inspired and typical of packaging of that particular period



19

The pre-release Vectrex press pack focused, as was to become standard industry practice in the following decade, on the systems' arcade graphics, controls and sounds

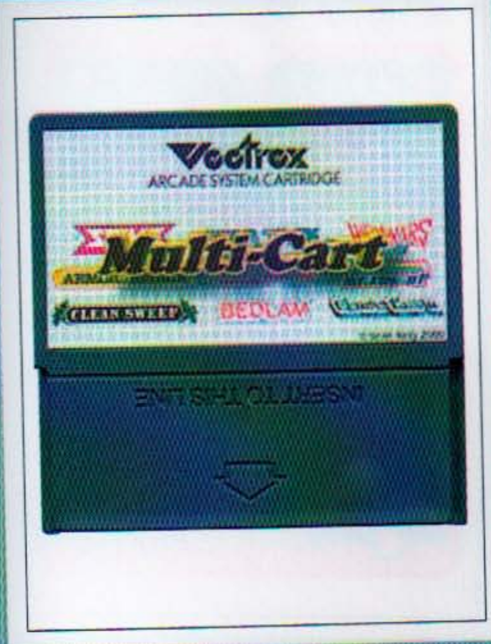
Allegedly one of the prime reasons for strong initial sales at the time was that the system, with its built-in screen, didn't require using the family TV. The console was large and stable featuring four full-size arcade buttons and a sturdy top-heavy analogue joystick (the first standard analogue controller pre-N64) designed to fit neatly into a compartment beneath the Vectrex screen, allowing the system to remain compact and, so the advertisers promised, portable.

By the end of 1982 GCE was desperately looking for someone to buy it out. Hawkins explains, "Basically, GCE was a small company shopping to be sold. They were startup people wanting to build the company and get out." Enter Milton Bradley. From the late-'70s Milton Bradley had been looking to the videogames market and watching its own boardgame-based profits diminish. The company stockholder reports for the early-'80s said that it was in trouble because electronic games were taking off and it was too reliant on boardgames. In March of 1983, Milton Bradley purchased GCE, thus acquiring the launched Vectrex. GCE had already booked national advertising for MB to use after the sale of the company. However, as soon as the deal was completed, MB pulled all the advertising and instead used its well-established distribution channels to expand the Vectrex's distribution overseas. By the summer, distribution had begun throughout Europe and Japan (handled by Bandai).

By the end of 1983 the videogame crash was in full swing. MB closed down GCE to distribute the Vectrex itself, discounting it as much as possible (first $150, then $100). In March 1984, the Vectrex was discontinued in Europe and phasing out of the unit began in the US. As with most of the videogames companies in 1984, MB was stuck with a huge inventory and duly forced to unload everything to discounters who sold them at fire sale prices throughout the remainder of 1984. The system sold for as little as $45 (£29) with carts at $5 to $10 (£3-6) apiece at that time.

It has been speculated that MB washed its hands of the Vectrex like this to look more attractive to Hasbro (with whom it would merge by May of that year), which was not interested in entering any area of videogames. By the end of 1984, Vectrex was nowhere to be seen. Eventually it was alleged that MB lost around $31.6m (£20m) due to the high cost of manufacturing Vectrex set against poor sales. At the 2000





Sean Kelly's Multi-Cart, first released in 1993, contains around 60 titles including all released games, prototypes and new fan titles

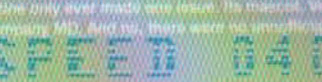




This colour Vectrex prototype surfaced recently at a classic gaming exhibition. Inevitably, it was too expensive to get off the ground



The Vectrex official magazine only ever made one issue. Its mascot, Vecto the alien, was allegedly based on the company MD. And no, there were no unofficial magazines either





Vectrex trivia

- In 1982, Vectrex games programmer Mark Indictor and his family moved out of Los Angeles to write games in the seclusion of a pine forest at 5,000 feet. An NBC news crew visited and interviewed him for a news item on eccentric computer hackers and their lifestyles.
- Vectrex was the first 16bit console. Like the GBA, all region games and peripherals were compatible with all region Vectrex machines.
- In 1983 several efforts were made to develop a colour Vectrex. One prototype used a colour TV tube that was instantly shown to be too expensive. Another used a projection TV with three vector scan tubes. It worked well but was again commercially impractical. Yet another effort was to use two layers of colour phosphor on a black and white type TV tube. Ultimately these ideas never got beyond the prototype table.
- One young Vectrex player's father worked at GCE. He recalls visiting the warehouse. "One programmer used to snort whipped cream gas all night while programming. My Dad used to trip on the cans when coming in for work the next morning. There were cases of them all over the floor. GCE management apparently put up with this..."
- In one interview **Bill Hawkins** indicated that the system of development in place at Western Technologies didn't allow for much cooperation between the game developers and Miva Filoseta, the lead overlay designer. "There was a great rift with Miva and the programmers when these things first came out... overlays never really were designed with the game. They had nothing to do with the game and, in fact, in a lot of cases, as programmers we didn't like them. At one point, we were thinking about putting a message up on the screen that said, 'For improved gameplay, remove the overlays'."
- The Vectrex showed up again a few years later when Abel & Associates converted the Vectrex into a text terminal for use in US malls and pizza parlours. For a quarter, you could have the machine perform the 'Luscher Colour Test' in which the player would pick colours in the order that they appealed to him (all on a monochrome screen). The machine would then analyse your personality. Vectrex machines have also been found converted into heart-monitoring devices as well. At the time of the terminal some former WT management were at Abel & Associates.
- One of the many anomalies of the system is the elusive Mr Boston promotional cartridge. A modified version of the game *Clean Sweep*, it was designed as a promotion for the Mr Boston's chain of liquor stores in the eastern US. At least two copies are known to exist; one has its own screen overlay, and both contain production ROMs, indicating that the cartridges were commercially produced. The liquor company gave out a limited number of customised cartridges of *Clean Sweep*. The box had a Mr Boston sticker on it. The overlay was essentially the regular *Clean Sweep* overlay with the Mr Boston name and logo. The game itself had custom text and the player controlled a top hat rather than a vacuum. Two copies have surfaced on eBay since 1998 and both went for over $1200 (£760).

Classic Gaming Expo, Sloper was asked what he thought the main factor in Vectrex's death was. "I think the critical factor was the timing, because at the point where MB bought GCE, it was 1983, and we had just crested the hump in the popularity of videogames. The first boom-bust cycle was very steeply up. And then, with *E.T.* and *Pac-Man*, it hit the top and came down hard; the Vectrex just went with it."

There is also more sinister evidence of a factor in Vectrex's demise. The Video Adventure store in San Jose, California recently revealed that in the early-'80s, Atari sent them a notice that allegedly went to all the main independent distributors of its products in America. It stated that no Atari goods would be released to any distributor that also carried the Vectrex products. The shop owner stated, "We had to choose between selling the innovative Vectrex system, or selling all other Atari videogames and computer systems. There was no choice. Not with us... and not with any other retailer. Overnight, Vectrex was dead."

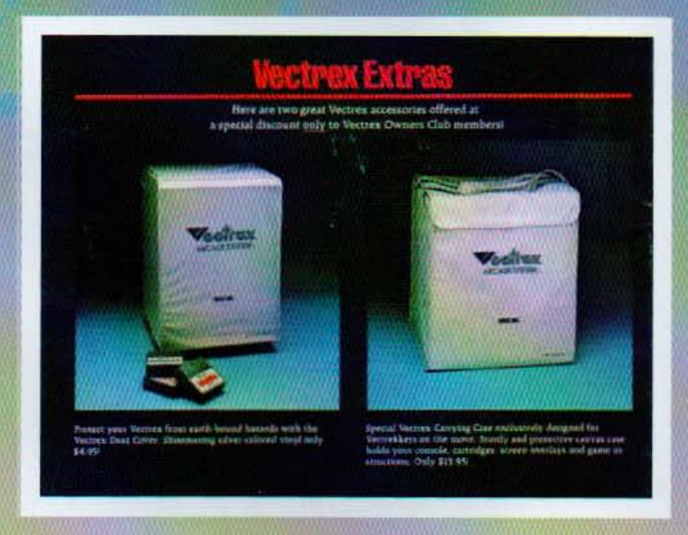
Edge spoke to two of the key collectors of Vectrex: one English, one American. **Jason Moore**, based in Milton Keynes, is the editor of fanzine 'Retrogames' and former manager of the affiliated shop in London. **Lance J Lewis**, from San Jose in California, worked at Atari as, among other things, lead level designer for *Alien Vs Predator*, and both *Hover Strike* games for the Jaguar. He has also worked at Rocket Science Games, AOL Games and 3DO. Despite an unnerving propensity for working with doomed companies he saw the light when commissioned for "yet another *Army Men* game," and decided to take a break from working in the industry. **Edge** wonders how two men from different cultures came to love the same system. "The first time I ever saw a Vectrex was in the early-'80s, surrounded by about 30 kids in a crowded John Lewis toy department," explains Moore. "As weary mothers dragged away their protesting children, I gradually got closer to the machine itself. Even before I got to see the machine, my imagination was captured by the sound. The very fact that I remember hearing the machine before ever seeing the graphics highlights how powerful it was for the time. It was like being in an arcade, as far removed from the bleeps and bloops of my Atari VCS as you could get. I was close to hysterical when it came to my mum's turn to pull me away. Today we are so hard to impress with new



GCE did almost everything right with early marketing. The software was rather well presented and looked nothing short of enticing



Colour was added to the Vectrex games with screen overlays, but the film's designer and the game developers did not cooperate



Obviously Vectrex extras such as these are desirable to the completist. A soft cover is expected to easily fetch £150-200 whilst the carry case is likely to be closer to £300



The ideal Vectrex machine comes boxed with all inserts. While hardware prices have fluctuated in the last few years the mint condition set-up shown will cost £200 minimum

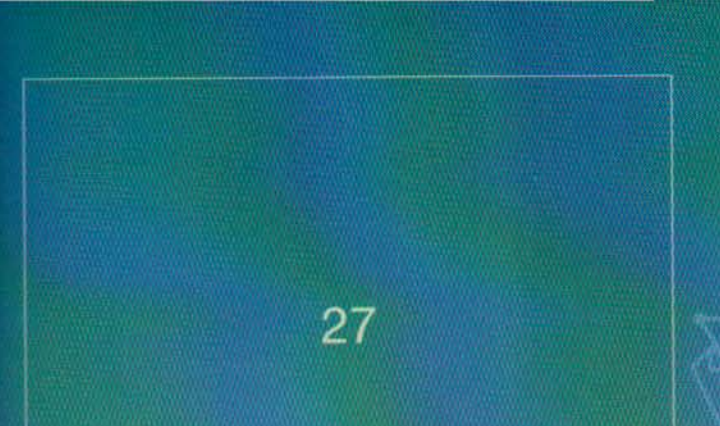
technology, but back in 1983, it was like seeing colour TV for the first time. It took me a while to save up the money, but once seen, I had to have a Vectrex. It's a console that once you've seen, you'll never forget."

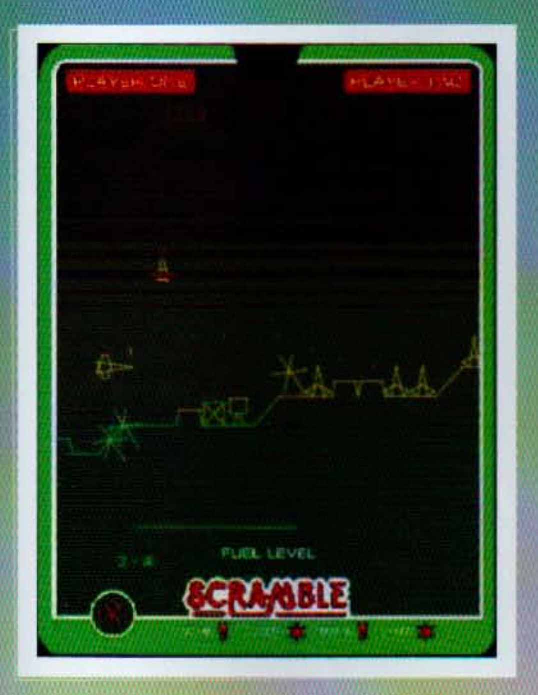
For Lewis, collecting had already become a concern at an early age. "Like most kids raised on 'Star Wars', I had an Atari VCS/2600; and that was the beginning of the obsession. When the Vectrex was released in 1982, I had to have it in my already growing collection. The built-in vector-graphic 'arcade' monitor was just the coolest thing."

Moore explains the console's popularity further. "The Vectrex is unique thanks to its single gun vector display system. It is unlikely any other company will ever release a machine using this rather archaic technology, so the Vectrex will always be unique. Add to this the built-in screen, the highly responsive analogue joystick, and the high quality sound effects, and you have the closest thing to an arcade machine for the home. The alternative configuration of consoles like the Vectrex and Virtual Boy provides a completely different kind of gaming experience, which in turn will always make them highly prized by collectors."

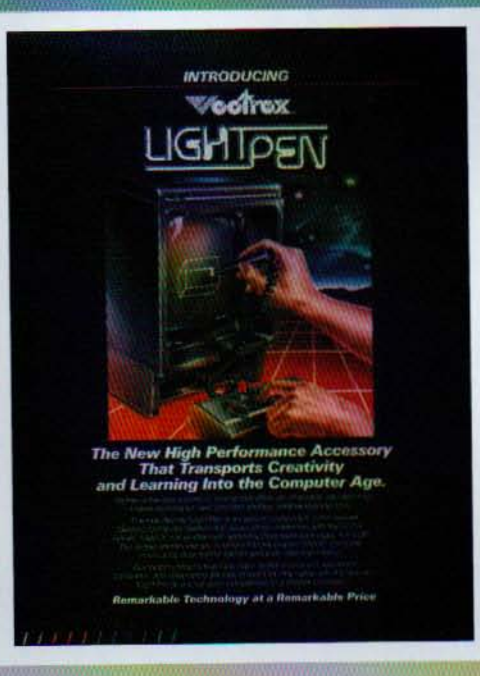
Lewis agrees. "It was the first cartridge-based home gaming console to have a built-in vector monitor. These things were really only seen in the arcades, and today, they're practically non-existent. It was also one of the last consoles manufactured before the great game crash, so it didn't have much of a chance to build a user-base, or its own place in pop-culture. A lot of mainstream gamers have never heard of the Vectrex, and the gamers that are familiar with it tend to feel a strong attachment to it."

With Moore selling various Vectrex materials over the years, **Edge** ponders whether the scene has changed at all. "The price of UK Vectrex consoles has fluctuated greatly in the past eight years, it's actually lower now than back in 1995. I think this is because those that had always wanted them would buy them at whatever price, but all now own them. Persuading new gamers to love such an old format is difficult, particularly when there aren't enough machines around for them to experience them in the flesh. I actually know people who downloaded Vectrex emulators and couldn't work out what all the fuss was about. It's hard to explain the huge difference when playing the real thing.





Screen overlays, in reality, added very little to the experience and most players will enjoy their games in plain vector screen glory



Not as rare as the 3D Imager but still desirable due to more compatible software, the Lightpen, if boxed, can sell for up to £150

Vectrex trivia

- Newport Cigarettes at one point commissioned a customised version of *Web Wars*. It just featured 'Newport Cigarettes Presents' on the title screen and trophy room screen. Bill Hawkins finished the coding which was sent to Newport, but it isn't known whatever happened with that, if anything.
- The Vectrex came close to coming back from the dead in 1988, when Smith Engineering considered resurrecting the Vectrex as a handheld unit. Milton Bradley thought the $100-plus price tag of the unit would make it unsellable, so the idea was scrapped. Nintendo's Game Boy was released the following year and enjoyed huge commercial success, but somehow the handheld Vectrex concept was never revived.
- The version of *Minestorm* that shipped with the Vectrex famously had a major bug which meant that, if you got to level 13, the game would crash. If you complained to the company, you would be sent a bug-free version of the game, known as *Minestorm II*, free of charge. Evidently nobody ever thought that any player could ever get to, let alone survive wave 12 so they only included data for 12 waves. The cart did not come with a manual or box.
- GCE had plans to build a computer system around the Vectrex. A prototype was shown CES where Hope Neiman, a company official, stated the device would probably be available by 1984. The computer was featured in two computing journals at the time: 'Popular Science' in October, 1983 and 'Creative Computing' in November, 1983. When product manager Michael Cartabiano was recently interviewed about the Vectrex computer he categorically denied that it made it past the early stages of development.
- Vectrex Computer Specs

Model name: Keyboard
Price: $200
RAM: 16k
RAM maximum: 64k
Data storage: Wafer-tape
Modem connection: Serial
Built-in programs: BASIC
Display size: 2000–4000 vector drawn characters

The most expensive games are obviously the most rare ones. *Pole Position* and *Polar Rescue* always fetch high prices in Europe because they weren't released here. The games for the 3D Imager also fetch more money because of their rarity. You're always going to have collectors wanting to complete their set, and games for the Vectrex are just the same."

Lewis claims that the Internet has had an impact on the market. "The Internet has really enabled the collecting community in general to expand. One can instantly find someone else anywhere on the planet to ask about why his or her Vectrex only displays a white dot in the centre of the screen. Newsgroup posts can be browsed to find out about the new games that are for sale. Or even find a working Vectrex on ebay. It's a very exciting time for collectors."

But will this avenue of collecting be anything more than a short-term fad that will die? Moore is predictably adamant. "I think the whole retro collecting scene will not only be sustained but go from strength to strength. We're at the tip of the iceberg. It wouldn't surprise me if, in ten years' time, common games like *Spike* or *Fortress of Narzod* are going for £300. Simple game mechanics may be out of fashion, but hardcore gamers will always appreciate them, and they don't make a game any less challenging. I think the Vectrex will always be a major retro collectable, it's just a shame there isn't more stuff out there to collect for it. As soon as you fill in the basic gaps and complete your standard software collection, you're left with super-rare titles that you'll need to mortgage your granny to buy."

It's a sentiment echoed by Lewis. "People who grew up on PlayStation *Tekken* look at the classic systems and laugh. That's their loss. Twenty years ago, developers didn't have the luxury of pushing 50m polygons per second with bump-mapping and pixel shading all running from the hardware. They had to make games sell on the merit of being fun. Systems like the Vectrex will always be more popular with the older gamers, the people who remember when there were *no* videogames. Each new console, no matter how cool or powerful it is, ships with an expiration date. Unfortunately, none of us can see that date. We just play it until we tire of it, or software support no longer exists. Some consoles, such as the Vectrex, continue to fight that expiration date off, and the collectors are the ones who can help."

Continued >

The software

When collecting Vectrex cartridges you are looking for the box, instructions, cartridge and overlay (if there was one). Most games can be found relatively easily but the last few will cause you extreme difficulty – but perhaps that is just another one of the draws to the Vectrex collecting scene. The price guide has been produced with the help of experts Jon Dyton and Chris Foulger who, in 1998, bought a Vectrex, spare controller, 13 games (including overlays), light pen and official carry case from a UK car boot sale, all for £7.

Minestorm II



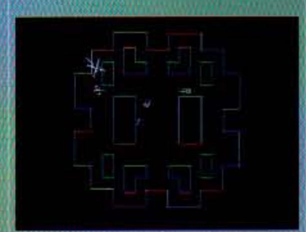


Release: GCE 19
Ref: VT 3000
Value: £100-200

This was the bug-free version of *Minestorm* that was sent to players who wrote in complaining about the built-in bug on level 13.

Armor Attack



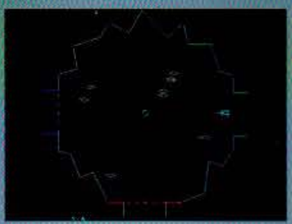


Release: GCE 1982
Ref: VT 3301
Value: £15-30

A 2D *Battlezone*-alike in which the player controls a jeep in the centre of an open maze. Responsive, smooth and well thought out.

Cosmic Chasm





Release: GCE 1982
Ref: VT 3101
Value: £20-30

The first home game that GCE ported from the arcade. As with many titles, MB later released the game in Europe itself.

Space Wars





Release: GCE 1982
Ref: VT 3105
Value: £30-45

Its monetary value hides the historical value. The game that started it all ported to a console a fraction of the size of the original.

Web Wars/Web Warp

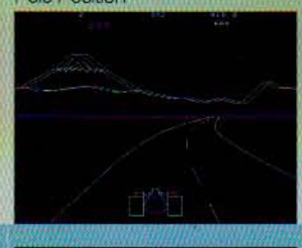




Release: GCE 1983
Ref: VT 3108
Value: £25-35

Consistently and unfairly compared to *Tempest*, *Web Wars* is a good pseudo 3D shooter with competent visuals and a twoplayer mode.

Pole Position



Release: GCE/Namco 1983
Ref: VT 3206
Value: £45-75

Rare conversion of the arcade classic. Much graphical effort was made on the player's vehicle leaving the others looking less impressive.

Fortress of Narzod

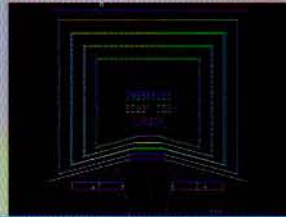




Release: GCE 1982
Ref: VT 3304
Value: £20-40

A very good *Galaga* type shooter in which you play a wizard on a hovercraft flying through angled walls to get to get to fortress Narzod.

Polar Rescue





Release: GCE 1983
Ref: VT 3308
Value: £30-75

A fantastic firstperson perspective submarine simulator, regarded by many to be the best original Vectrex game. Fetches high prices in Europe.

Bedlam



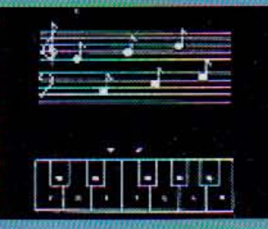


Release: GCE 1982
Ref: VT 3305
Value: £20-45

Often described as an inside-out *Tempest* (by the developer as much as anyone), *Bedlam* has enough original features to stand alone.

Melody Master

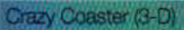




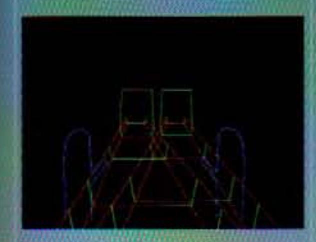
Release: GCE 1983
Ref: VT 3602
Value: £45-75

With Lightpen functionality this standard early '80s music game is one of the more sought after titles to both European and US collectors.

Crazy Coaster (3-D)







Release: GCE 1983
Ref: VT 3634
Value: £45-65

One of the few (and poor) titles released for use with the 3D Imager glasses. An experience ROMs don't translate very successfully.

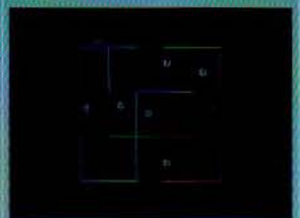
Scramble



Release: GCE 1982
Ref: VT 3103
Value: £15-25

A classic port of Konami's side scrolling space shooter that would eventually evolve into *Gradius*. Very demanding and frustrating even to the expert player.

Berzerk



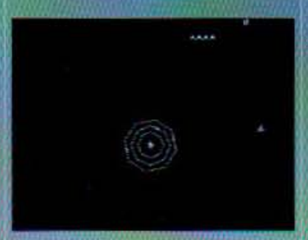


Release: GCE 1982
Ref: VT 3302
Value: £15-40

A port of Stern's first arcade hit in which the constant redrawing of images frequently slowed the game to a snail's pace.

Star Castle





Release: GCE 1983
Ref: VT 31 VT 3109
Value: £50-75

One of the hardest games on the format, this is an excellent port of the Cinematronics' classic. The tiny graphics don't spoil an enthralling experience.

Mail Plane

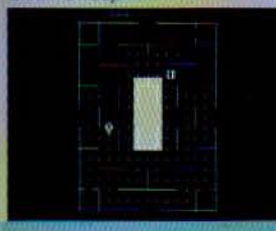




Release: N/A
Ref: VT 3603
Value: £1500

Two copies of this prototype have been verified and sourced (one by Jason Moore). Estimated value shown if another made the market.

Clean Sweep



Release: GCE 1982
Ref: VT 3303
Value: £15-25

A *Pac-Man* clone where you take the role of a vacuum cleaner in a bank. Your vacuum can only hold a certain number of pellets.

Dark Tower





Release: N/A
Ref: VT 3307
Value: £2000

Only one prototype of this 3D adventure game has been verified. Many collectors would pay this price if another came on to the market.

Star Trek





Release: GCE 1982
Ref: VT 3107
Value: £20-35

The aim is to find and destroy the Klingon mothership in this pacy and entertaining 'Star Trek' licence. It was released as *Star Ship* in Europe.

Spinball





Release: GCE 1983
Ref: VT 3204
Value: £25-40

A very good, if flickery, pinball game that, like *Polar Rescue*, was one of the first ever titles to have a pause function.

Heads Up (Soccer Football in UK)





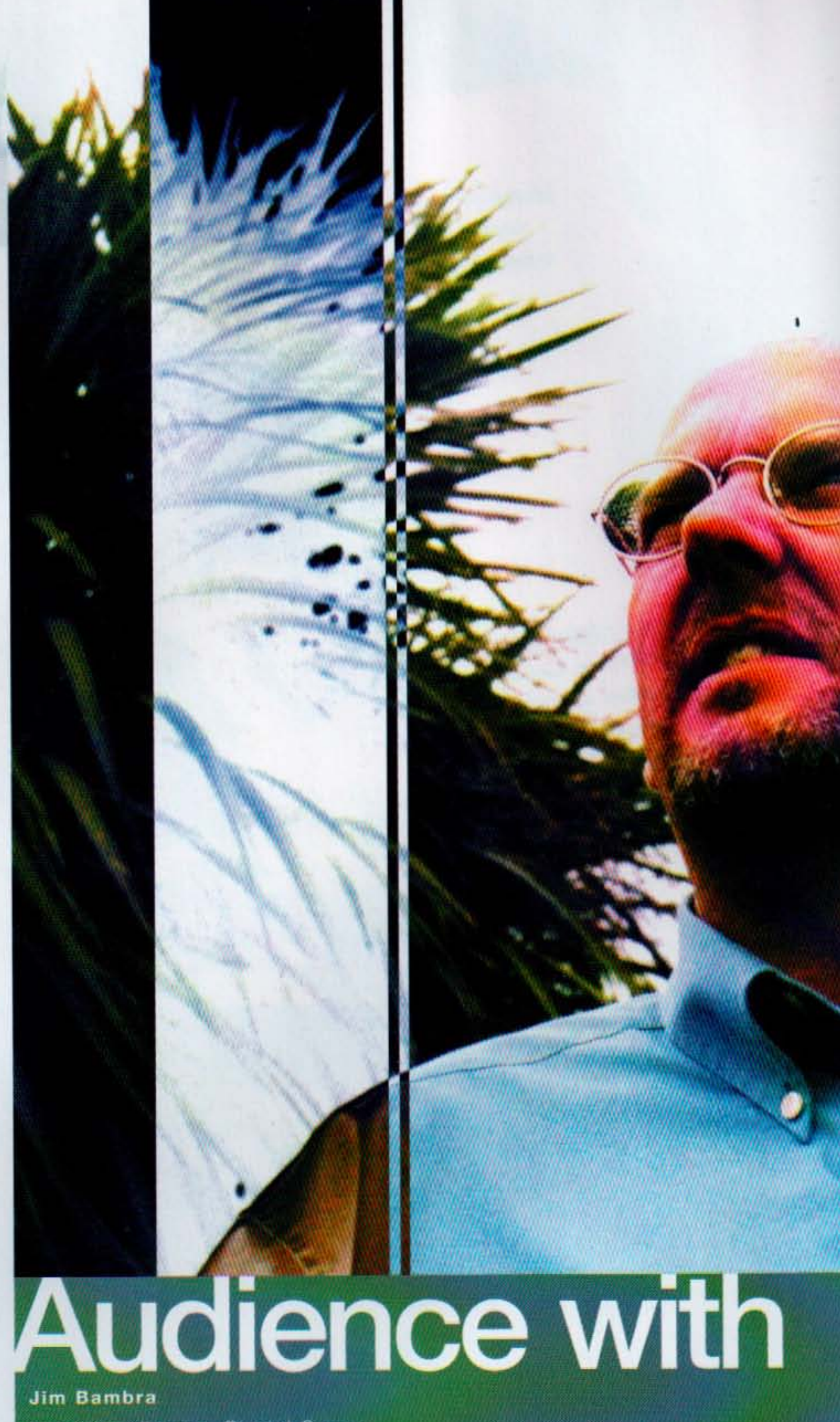
Release: GCE 1983
Ref: VT 3203
Value: £15-25

This soccer game was ambitious and accomplished. With three-a-side play and switchable characters it is one of the grandfathers of the genre.

A pivotal role

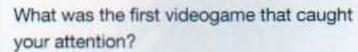
Jim Bambra's fascination with games started at an early age with Cluedo and Monopoly. He discovered role-playing games at university and, on graduation, started reviewing games for Games Workshop's magazine 'White Dwarf'. His first game design job was with Dungeons & Dragons publisher TSR, after which he moved to Games Workshop to work on its Warhammer role-playing system. As a freelance game designer, he also worked for Steve Jackson Games and West End Games.

In 1990, he made the jump to videogames, joining MicroProse as a design consultant, becoming head of design and working on games such as *Fields of Glory*, *Grand Prix*, various *X-COM* products and *Gunship*. In 1996, together with key members of MicroProse, Bambra set up Pumpkin Studios, as a fully-owned part of Eidos. It released *Warzone 2100*, which sold over 350,000 copies. Despite this, Eidos decided to shut down the studio in 2000, after which Bambra formed Pivotal, becoming managing director. Its debut game, *Conflict: Desert Storm*, released in 2002, has gone on to sell over a million copies and won an International EMMA for best console game. Bambra is currently overseeing the development of three games. First to be released will be *The Great Escape*, a game based on the Steve McQueen movie license. The two others are set in the *Conflict* franchise. *Conflict: Desert Sabre* is the sequel to *Desert Storm*, while *Conflict: Missing Presumed Dead* switches the squad-based action to Vietnam.



Audience with

Jim Bambra
managing director, Pivotal Games



What was the first videogame that caught your attention?

I had a BBC computer, which was a fantastic bit of kit at the time. I thought *Elite* was a very nice game. It was particularly interesting for me because it was based on Traveller, which was a sci-fi roleplaying game I had played. The developers of *Elite* were obviously heavy Traveller fans. I was amazed Traveller's publisher never took out any lawsuits against them. But *Elite*'s wireframe 3D graphics were fantastic. And as someone who had played Traveller, it brought home what a computer could add to gaming. With a board game, you can pull left and fire off a missile in your imagination but it's not quite the same as seeing it happen onscreen.

After ten years of pen and paper games, what first struck you about working on videogames?

Videogames are all about restrictions. You're limited to technology but you can't allow yourself to be limited by that technology. It's about how you make that work to create something that looks good and then make what you've designed work well with it. Also, in the old days of pen and paper design, you could get a game done in three, maybe six months. With computer games, design is just the early stage. You have another 18 months trying to transform that idea into reality with other people. Design for computer games is a big selling job. You've got to sell the idea to all the programmers and artists and other designers but at the same time leave room for interpretation for everyone else to add something. You can take nothing for granted with computer games because a computer doesn't think. It's all got to be thought about and kicked around amongst developers. With paper games, you used to go to an artist and say, "This is a good idea for the front cover". Now you've got 20 artists each with their own ideas of what to do. My job is to say, "This is the style of game, this is what we should be looking for, come up with some images and we'll boil it down".

Which of your MicroProse games were you happiest with?

I liked *Fields of Glory*. It needed a little bit longer in terms of development, but I believe it captured realtime combat at a time when everything else around was turnbased. It eventually ended up as a Napoleonic game, but I wanted to do a modern game; I wanted to have armour and modern weapons. In retrospect, I suppose that was the spark for both *Warzone* and *Desert Storm* to some extent but nevertheless *Fields of Glory* covers a colourful period and I think it played pretty well. I won't deny there were some rough edges but it was the first product. We could have done more on it but MicroProse got bought up by Spectrum [Holobyte] and they stopped all PC product development. The result was that we ended up canning a lot of very good projects during that whole process.

As a designer, how frustrated are you by the industry's fixation with graphics and technology?

Part of my frustration when working at MicroProse was that it seemed to be caught in a "Do we embrace 3D technology or not" dilemma? We had some great 3D games, like *Grand Prix*, but there were also games such as *Legacy* – a semi-3D RPG, which meant that it looked a bit old and unfortunately it came out at the same time as *Alone in the Dark* which also made it look horribly dated. So the point of getting away from MicroProse and setting up Pumpkin was that we could gear *Warzone 2100*'s game design with the technology. I think *Warzone* is a lot more enjoyable to play because it is in 3D. And we would definitely have taken the 3D elements a lot further if we had continued with the franchise. I really though it was great, because you could jump in behind the vehicles, you could then look over the cliffs and the whole terrain would be revealed properly.

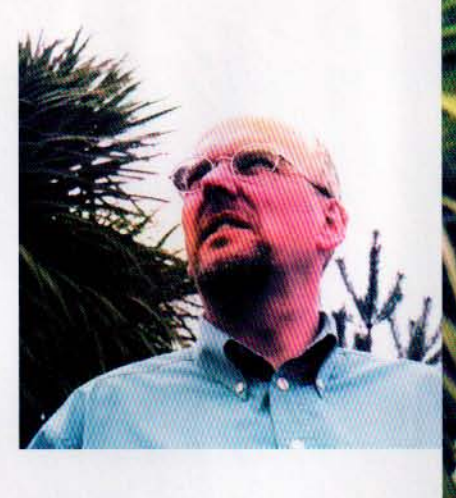
Do you think a game's eye candy is less important than it used to be?

No, it's as important as ever. We've been told *Conflict: Desert Storm* doesn't look as nice as other games but that's a decision you have to make – it's a big world, and there are four characters, lots of enemies and sophisticated AI. Yes, we could have used more resources on the graphics but you wouldn't have any other elements of the game. *Devil May Cry* looks beautiful for example but it doesn't even have opening doors. You go up to the doors and teleport through them. We have doors that open – that's another concession. But I think the next generation of consoles will bring a movie-like quality and, once you've hit that, game development becomes more a content issue than a technology issue. We're not there yet. Eye candy will still be something we have to push on current generation hardware. We'll get movie-quality games in time though and when we don't have to worry about frame rate and how many pixels and polys you can push, it will become about content. Movie camera technology really hasn't changed that much since the 1950s so film directors have had 50 years to focus on content. With games, we can get a hell of a lot better.

"Videogames are all about restrictions. You're limited to technology but you can't allow yourself to be limited by that technology"

It must be very disheartening as a designer, when an idea you've been working on gets cancelled?

Yes, it is up to a point. I find that it's easy to bash out a load of two-page concepts. It's a bit of a shotgun approach. But where it becomes hard is after you've been working on something for three or four months, because then you're emotionally involved. You've done the creative thinking, you've had all the fun and now you are in the slog stage of writing it up. It's just like any writing – it's got to be done. But once you've put in the emotional involvement, it's hard to then discover that it's been canned and that you won't be able to follow through with the idea, because you've put your heart and soul into it.



Warzone 2100 was a highly critically acclaimed game. Which elements were you most proud of?

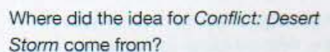
Actually, it was Eidos's best reviewing game ever, even better than *Tomb Raider*. It broke the mould for RTS games. Obviously, there was the 3D element but it had a novel structure too. The thing I hate about RTSs is that, at the start of every level, you have to build a base, then a power station and then a town hall or whatever. One of the great things about *Warzone* was that you built a base on the first mission which you would then keep throughout the first campaign. You'd have to load up your troops and perform away missions on other maps but you could still call in reinforcements from the base and then automatically keep building units. We carried that theme into the second campaign where you had to rescue a base that was under attack, so we weren't forcing players to build from scratch. Then, in the final campaign, your base was under constant attack so you had to keep moving it because the enemy was destroying it as fast as you could build it.

So how did Pivotal Games first come about?

After Eidos decided that it didn't want *Warzone 2*, we were trying to get another product off the ground. We had a great concept but because it clashed with *Commandos*, Eidos decided it didn't want that either, so we felt like we were going nowhere. The studio wasn't firing creatively anymore so it became clear to me that we needed to get out of the situation and go independent. You need passion in a game development studio. If people are just simply coming in and doing nine-to-five, you're never going to ship and even if you do, no one is going to want to play what you have. You really need people who are fired up and passionate and want to do a great job. We looked at doing a management buy-out but in the end Eidos decided it was simpler just to shut Pumpkin down. The result was that we set up Pivotal with 15 people of the 25 who had been at Pumpkin. It was a team that believed in itself. We knew we worked well together and wanted to continue working well together but I had to tell them, "If you've got any doubts or are worried about money, you don't owe me anything. Go find other jobs. You've all got mortgages and you've got lives, you don't have to come down this path", but those 15 people did. Of those, two have since moved on but the other 13 are still here and they are a great industry team. Interestingly, 12 of the 15 had been at MicroProse, so it was a highly experienced team too. They believed we would get a deal and were happy to give it three months and live off their redundancy money from Eidos. And that's not to say the going didn't get tough. It's a very long road to getting signed. If you sign a product for £200,000 no one cares but when you're into the millions, then no one person can sign it. Thankfully for us, we signed with SCi just at the end of that three month period.

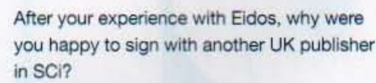
"You need passion in a game development studio. If people are just simply coming in and working a nine-to-five day, then no one is ever going to want to play what you have"





Where did the idea for *Conflict: Desert Storm* come from?

One great thing about having done a complex 3D RTS in *Warzone* was that we proved we could do rendering, we could do AI and we could do complex movement. So instead of a zoomed-out view where you're controlling 80-odd vehicles, the idea of a much simpler game, in which you're only controlling four characters, came about. You still have the asset management stuff but because it's now four characters we can add a bit of roleplaying as each character is subtly different. Connors is undoubtedly the best at using the heavy machine gun but you can give it to Foley, the sniper, if you want to. That was a design decision so that if a character was killed or incapacitated, the player would still be able to complete the missions. Also, you get the medals and experience at the end of each level so that the guys get better and it also gives an extra element with people developing favourite characters that they will use more frequently in order to push their rank up. Personally, I really like being Jones, the demolition guy with the silenced submachine gun. Something else I am proud of is the simplicity of the interface. I remember looking at the interface of *Rainbow Six* and thinking, "That's not a game, that's a level editor". People want immediacy.



After your experience with Eidos, why were you happy to sign with another UK publisher in SCi?
The big advantage with SCi is that it's local so you get fast decisions compared to the big US publishers. For them, the UK office tends to be a shop window and so all the important decisions are made in the US. It was a good deal for SCi because it was looking to invest in quality developers and we had a track record, so we were a dream come true for them.

Around the same time as you signed with SCi, you also became part of Geoff Brown's Kaboom group. Why did you do that?
The main benefit is being in a larger group of developers, so there's more muscle than if we were on our own. In a way, there's a bit of bet spreading going on as you're not a standalone developer, which can make you vulnerable. If your publisher goes down, you are out of work. Kaboom has the advantage that we get access to technical services as well as things like press and human resources too.

How do you react to people criticising the game in the light of current situation in Iraq?
We have been accused of cashing in, but of course it's completely fortuitous. If I could predict events like that, I'd have a much better record when it comes to betting on the Derby! Actually, the game originally started out as the *Second World War Game*. We had a beautiful demo set on D-Day but I realised that everyone else was making WWII games as well so decided to switch to something more modern. *Medal of Honor* came out a couple of months later so that was one of the best decisions we ever made. People said, "Won't a Desert Storm game be a bit one sided?", but there were lots of guys out there, using only their wits to survive, doing cool things like SCUD hunting and blowing up bunkers.

Generally, there has been some controversy about games, such as *Soldier of Fortune*, which allow players to kill civilians. How did you deal with this in *Desert Storm*?
There's a penalty for shooting civilians. It affects your mission score so although we don't blatantly say "Don't do this" if you want to shoot civilians, then you won't do as well in the game, which makes it something of a moral choice. Also, the mission is never about killing civilians. I've been asked about my reaction to the Iraqi soldiers in the game. You treat them as real, experienced Iraqi soldiers. That's the setting we used. But at the end of the day, I think we shouldn't forget that games, like movies, are entertainment.

"I talk to so many people who think that family entertainment is dead. Well of course it's not dead. Jak and Daxter is amazing"

One of the things you must be happiest with is *Conflict: Desert Storm*'s success in the US as that's been a hard market for UK-developed games to crack recently?
I always set out to design with the US market in mind. You need to have a global view because if you break America, it's a huge market. You can't be colloquial. We don't give a shit if we play American games but Americans won't play anything that's overtly English, so why go and make an English game? I lived in the US for a bit and have lots of American friends, so I think I have a fair understanding of what you need to do. But there are some obvious things as well – don't have cars driving on the left for example. At the end of the day, all this enthusiasm for games is to make a living, the best living for everyone in the studio. You never set out to make a great game that five people will love.

How does *The Great Escape* differ from the *Conflict*-branded games?
The decision was made that *Conflict* is a great squad-based game so we should explore other game mechanics. *Escape* is different. It's a single-character game for starters although it has a four-character focus, and it's much more stealthy and puzzle-based. You've got to collect objects and avoid guards. As well as using the theme of the movie, we also have a precursor element, so you get to play the characters before they are captured. And there's some combat elements in there too. That's intentional because, while stealth is fun, it can be hard on the nerves so we wanted to provide some release.

The past year has been a difficult time for UK developers. Why do you think that is?
We're going through a major shake-out at the moment. What we are seeing is developers not being structured enough. Confounding Factor is one example, Elixir is another - their games should have shipped two or three years ago. You have to have a business side as well as a design side. Developers need to be realistic about all aspects of their games, particularly proving they can release a game in a timely fashion. It's certainly getting very competitive. We look at some new games and think "That's fantastic... oh shit. The quality level's gone up again". You have to always be reactive to that but have enough confidence in yourself not to go "We really need to integrate this new trend into our game" because then you end up with a mish-mash. But the bigger the industry gets, the fewer developers will survive.

Will Pivotal have to get bigger then?
Our vision is not to go bigger than two teams because any more than that and I think we'll lose what makes us good. One advantage of being part of the Kaboom Group is we could add more studios if that was deemed the way to go. Our teams are growing in size though. In 2000, we started with 15 people, now it's 25-30 people per team, so we almost have 60 people. My job has changed a lot because of that. I'd like to be able to talk to everyone on the team on a daily basis but I've had to devolve a lot of management to within the teams. I think that some studios have not been able to make that transition. And in the future, I think that core teams are going to get even bigger when we move to PlayStation3. That will involve another programmer, probably a couple of networking programmers, as well as more artists and more designers.

testscreen

The world's most respected videogame reviews

Edge's review policy

Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge**'s rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

Star Fox Adventures

Sure, it doesn't hide its mechanisms all that well – go there, find that, return it here – but *Star Fox Adventures* has the ocassional touch of brilliance to keep you going.



(GameCube) Nintendo

Lost Kingdoms

Edge is avidly replaying one of the most unsung titles of 2002 and can attest to its ability to captivate for long spells. A sequel is a cause for card-fan celebration.



(GameCube) Activision

Planescape: Torment

Quite apart from the 'Memento'-style narrative reconstruction, *Torment* simply opens so many doors to different playing styles that it still bears up today.



(PC) Interplay

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

Can't stay away for long. **Edge** returns to the city of vice where the game universe is so flexible you can make up your own missions. You don't want to know.



(PlayStation2) Rockstar North

Geek or unique?

Wearing your gaming badge with pride

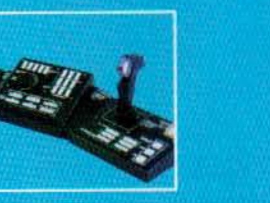
Shut all the doors, cut off the telephone, prevent the neighbours from speaking in muffled tones. *Steel Battalion* is about to hit a store near you. And despite all our efforts it seems that videogames are still something to be ashamed of. Sure, it's socially acceptable to play a match or two of *Pro Evolution Soccer* with your mates, but a big robot game? With a controller the size of an '80s mobile phone? It screams "nerd" from a mile away.

Imagine the ignominy of carrying the *Steel Battalion* package through the streets of London, Birmingham, Manchester or Harrogate. It does, after all, look like it might contain a rocket launcher. But worse still – there are screenshots emblazoned on the side of the packaging. Buy *Steel Battalion* and there's no hiding your hardcore gamer credentials. It's not like you can conceal the box in a HMV bag so people think you're passionate about something worthwhile, like listening to music.

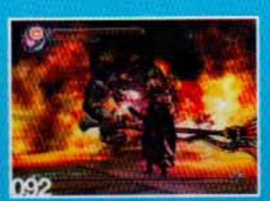
Here's a piece of advice: if someone doesn't think your pastime deserves the time of day, then sod 'em. Anyone with an enthusiasm for games should be able to walk tall and with unwavering voice announce their love to the world, not have to scurry into a darkened bedroom with software secreted away in a brown paper bag. If the ignorant believe you're weird because you get a kick out of *Rez*, *Ico*, *Super Mario Sunshine* or *Steel Battalion* then that's their problem, not yours.

But some gamers don't help themselves. Whether it's insecurity, peer pressure or a shrivelled sense of self worth, there are some who would sooner admit to liking Genesis than *Command & Conquer Generals*. If the response to the cover on **Edge**'s last issue is anything to go by (see inbox, p126) then there's still a few gamers out there that can get embarrassed by a digital representation of a woman, never mind a hulking robot.

Steel Battalion represents the pinnacle of home entertainment peripheral technology currently available. And while **Edge** was somewhat disappointed by the overall experience, the pedals, levers, switches and joysticks that make up the controller is something to be celebrated, not shunned. As passionate gamers we all have a duty to educate the less well informed. Or even better, get a non-believer hooked on *Samba de Amigo*.











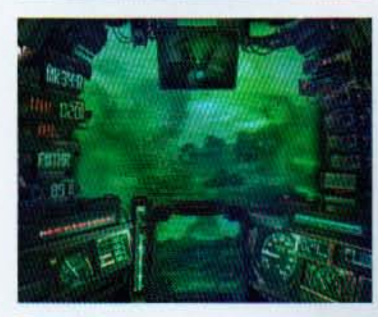



Steel Battalion

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft** Developer: **Capcom** Price: **£130** Release: **March 28**







The manipulator arm is used to lift crates and open doors (centre), while the night vision scope adds clarity and atmosphere to the night sorties

If ever there was a game to validate your hardcore credentials, *Steel Battalion* is it. A controller that looks like it's been designed as a prop for a film set, a game structure that sees all your saved data wiped from existence if your character dies and a £130 price tag. But let's get one thing clear from the start: *Steel Battalion* loses no marks for its high price. If you're a dedicated gamer then such things shouldn't matter. No, Capcom's ungainly behemoth falls down for a number of other reasons.

"Steel Battalion makes you feel part of a game universe like nothing outside of a seaside amusement arcade has ever managed to muster"

As a concept *Steel Battalion* displays a breathtaking level of ingenuity and vision. You can imagine the original blueprint landing on the desks of CEOs at Capcom towers, with the resulting looks of astonishment as the outlandish proposal is taken in. And credit where credit's due, you get the impression that the company's business strategists interfered little during the game's conception and execution. As an example of a single unwavering statement of intent *Steel Battalion* has no peer.

There's no doubting that the game's trump card is its ability to make you, for want of a better expression, feel robot. "We want the experience to be extreme," **Atsushi Inaba**, the game's producer, told **Edge** back in **E**111. "You are truly taking part in an ongoing conflict... your objective is not really the mission but your mastery of your robot. The basic idea was to have your own cockpit at home."

He has succeeded. Once the controls are mastered and the various functions become second nature, *Steel Battalion* makes you feel part of a game universe like nothing outside of a seaside amusement arcade has ever managed to muster. The peripheral, replete with everything from a dodge pedal to a windscreen washer button instils a sense of awe in the user that should not be underestimated. It makes the experience unique and, at times, thrilling.

But now for some bad news – *Steel Battalion*'s level design has an over-insistence on prescribed goals and restrictive event triggers. In fact, 'over-insistence' is too kind a term.

Previously in E109, E111, E112









It's possible to zoom in the camera to help you spot enemies and detect their movements. Missiles can be tracked on the radar screen



Sitting at the controls for the first time is at once daunting and exhilarating. The start-up sequence asks you to flip and switch a number of buttons before you can even begin moving. The feedback, in terms of flashing lights and humming noises, is terrific and helps to draw you into another world





Steel Battalion puts you in a straitjacket that completely undermines the verisimilitude engendered through the controller and cockpit display. Commanding a mech warrior should be liberating and empowering, but the memory-test level design fundamentally breaks the spell. Enemies begin their predestined lumbering at the same points of the map every time, set-pieces are triggered whenever you enter the locus of action and most levels offer a limited path through to the mission objective.

This reliance on clockwork level design is further compounded by the fact that you often have to find a particular technique for beating a boss or finding a route to the goal. Destroying the battleship in the docks on level four, for instance, is made all the more easier once you discover an indestructible warehouse that provides cover for your missile sallies. Dying several times before this discovery is made is just plain annoying. And that's the game's real downfall: restarting a *Steel Battalion* level forces you through exactly the same series of events before you reach the mission goal. When you consider that some missions are over 40 minutes long, you can imagine the irritation this can provoke.

If the combat with other VTs (Vertical Tanks) was enthralling then some of this could be forgiven. While it's true that initial battles on fresh levels are rousing, the novelty wears thin upon subsequent re-encounters. On a positive note, more mechs and weapons are unlocked as progress is made. The thrill of climbing inside a second- or third-generation mech, complete with a more dynamic cockpit display, functionality, speed and agility is one of the game's greatest facets. It really adds to your sense of empowerment and trying out new weapons is a psychological boost

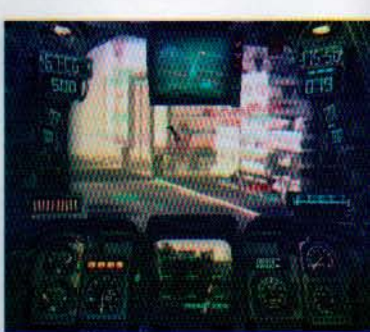
Toast in the shell

There's no question that *Steel Battalion* is an ungainly beast to get to grips with. In fact, it's a bit like learning to drive, but without any instruction. The missions pile on the pressure incrementally and the game's internal consistency extends to an interrupted tutorial which literally throws you into the hot seat. One of *Steel Battalion*'s more controversial features is its data-saving feature. Get destroyed and you have a couple of seconds to eject before your whole game is deleted. Hardcore or digital masochism? **Edge** welcomes such a move, but some may not.



Special filters are used to recreate the sense that you are at the helm of an electronic beast. Visibility through the monitor improves markedly as you purchase and use second- and third-generation mechs







Once the controls become second nature you'll be stomping around the *Steel Battalion* world launching missiles and destroying whole villages with gusto. An Xbox Live sequel is currently under development





Although objectives are highlighted during the mission briefings, new events are triggered out on the battlefield. These come without warning and can be irritating

after many a traumatic conflict. Also, missions that see you infiltrating enemy bases or cities are more atmospheric and stimulating.

Capcom's designers have clearly never used thirdparty memory cards. Losing data after days of diligent play is one of the most excruciating experiences that can befall a gamer. Capcom, however, took the decision to make the game as 'realistic' as possible. Die in *Steel Battalion* and all your mission data is scrubbed from the Xbox hard drive. Extreme, but thankfully, offset by a generous credit remuneration system. As long as you have another mech in reserve and you press the eject button within a few seconds of final destruction then your data will be safe.

Credits are awarded when you complete missions and bonuses are granted depending on how you fare out on the battlefield. Take less damage, for instance, and you can expect more money to play with. Along with purchasing new mechs, a number of music cassettes can also be bought to improve your in-stomp entertainment. *Steel Battalion* is a large game, but it feels padded because the original ten missions are repeated, simply with extra objectives, enemies and the occasional fresh sortie thrown in. Getting through the first batch of missions also sees you promoted to a command position that in theory grants you new executive powers.

But again, *Steel Battalion* undoes itself. The AI of enemy VTs is reasonable, but the AI of your own allied mechs can be idiotic. You'll see them walking into buildings, turning dementedly on the spot and just generally getting in the way of your own advancements. Commanding them consists of turning your radio dial and sending pre-canned signals such as 'fall back' or 'advance', most of which are completely ignored. Although such behaviour doesn't entirely undermine the game's finer qualities – largely because you can complete all the missions without having to rely on your allies – it breaks your suspension of disbelief.

Whether you'll want to invest so much money in *Steel Battalion* comes down to how much of a videogame archivist you are. There's no doubt that it has some inspirational moments, but this is a game strictly for those who can forgive rusty old-skool level structure. Knowledge that work on an Xbox Live-enabled sequel is underway is welcome, and should eliminate many of the AI problems. But as a singleplayer experience *Steel Battalion* sometimes feels less like hardcore and more like hard work.

Edge rating: Six out of te

Devil May Cry 2

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Capcom** Developer: **In-house** Price: **$50 (£32)** Release: **Out now (US), Spring (UK)**





Edge isn't entirely convinced by the way the game's environment hangs together – the urban/Gothic mix feels forced and just doesn't really ever gel

This isn't really a sequel. True, there is a '2' in the title but even the game's earliest moment (a cut-scene) betrays this labelling. Then again, the time elapsed since the original's release gives a good indication of the curtailed development period and the constraints it has undoubtedly placed on Capcom's internal team.

On a superficial level, these cutbacks extend to presentation, with the layer of polish evident in *DMC* simply absent. Cut-scenes are sporadic and fail to match the cinematic quality of those offered in the first game – when combined with the scarcity of voice acting (and in particular, Dante's wisecracking), these rob *DMC2* of much personality. It's almost as if the protagonist spends the entire game sulking at being forced to do battle with demons so soon after ridding the world of the last lot.

But at least he has some company this time around, in the form of Lucia, the game's second playable character (see Angel delight). Her adventure may see her utilise the same locales as Dante but her route through and experiences within them differ just sufficiently enough to make the extra time



Bosses tend to dwarf your character but they're not particularly tough. Indeed, the game is too easy and as such can be finished rather quickly. Still, there are secret rooms to encourage (re)exploration

"The necessity to highlight the game's flaws should be evident to anyone who's played DMC, enjoyed it and is expecting an improvement"

investment worthwhile. Indeed, given the brevity of Dante's undertaking (most players should clear the 18 missions well within four hours), there are few who won't welcome the chance to prolong the affair. Once it is over, there is always the opportunity to go back and improve on those grades, as in the first game.

If you've played *DMC*, you'll be aware there's more to simply blasting or slicing opponents out of the way: the more stylish the execution, the more points awarded. A series of special moves exist but one of the game's charms is the ability to create your own sequences, and the new abilities *DMC2* introduces (running along or up walls, bi-directional shooting, somersaulting out of danger) certainly increase the range of permutations. Reward for style again take the form of red orbs but rather than using these to open up doors, you just exchange them before a mission for weapon upgrades or health and magic item purchases.

But in terms of game dynamic there has been relatively little change. The leaning towards action at the expense of puzzle elements is obvious and if anything the range is now more limited, with few of the inventive gameplay twists seen in *DMC*. While this doesn't adversely affect the appeal of the combat system which remains one of the finer and more satisfying examples around, it will undoubtedly disappoint those looking for a repeat of the injection of other-genre elements so appreciated in the latter stages of this game's predecessor.

Add in a camera system that often manages to disorientate and you have a rather negative-reading review. Don't get us wrong, there's still fun to be had here. The necessity to highlight the game's flaws should be evident to anyone who's played the original, enjoyed it and is understandably expecting a significant improvement. *DMC2* doesn't really offer that. While polishing some elements of the original and adding some interesting touches of its own, this 'sequel' fails to deliver an experience that betters its predecessor. You could argue this is partly due to the novelty value *DMC* undoubtedly benefitted from upon its release but an objective look should reveal that ultimately *DMC2* is a slight disappointment. It's an interlude, and an enjoyable one certainly, but the title's got the wrong number on it.

Edge rating: Six out of te





Running up and along walls are just two of the new actions to play with. As before the way you dispose of enemies is graded throughout and affects the number of red orbs you receive per kill

Previously in Exxx











This time the Devil Trigger power-up revolves around an amulet system – by collecting powers (ice, fire, fly, run, etc) you can then select which you'd like to equip, swapping between them depending on the nature of a level. Pressing L1 activates your alter ego until you run out of DT charge (which is replenished during combat). One of Dante's new funky moves (left)





Graphically things are certainly impressive although visual improvements over the first game aren't immediately apparent. Capcom has confirmed that the PAL version will feature a 60Hz option

Angel delight



Quicker and marginally more agile than Dante, Lucia – *DMC2*'s second playable character – not only has her own repertoire of attacks but also tends to favour a different selection of weapons. While Dante is running around with pistols, machine guns, shotguns and rocket launchers (in addition to his fine selection of swords, of course), Lucia tends to stick to blade-related armoury. Her Devil Trigger gauge also diminishes at a slower rate than Dante's, giving you more time to appreciate her white angelic, deadly form. Though both games are short, Lucia's adventure does come on a second disc.

Unreal II: The Awakening

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Atari** Developer: **Legend Entertainment** Price: **£35** Release: **Out now**

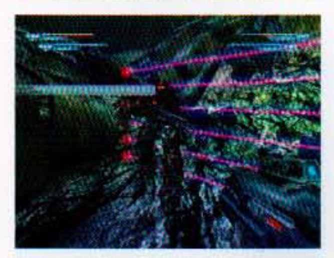
On a very basic level it's clear what's wrong with *Unreal II*; your character moves slowly and the choice of weapons isn't very satisfying. It's not clear, though, what *Unreal II* has got to do with previous titles in the series. The game has been created from scratch by an entirely new development team and, apart from a relatively brief appearance by the Skaarj, the game boasts little in the way of thematic or narrative continuity with the original *Unreal*. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing, of course – the original was, after all, inferior to id's *Quake II* on balance – but it also commenced with what is still one of gaming's most memorable and atmospheric opening sequences, and was punctuated throughout with remarkable set-pieces and skilfully structured levels. None of which can accurately be said of *Unreal II*.

"There's very little in the way of memorable changes of pace or rhythm; encounters just seem to happen and are instantly forgettable"





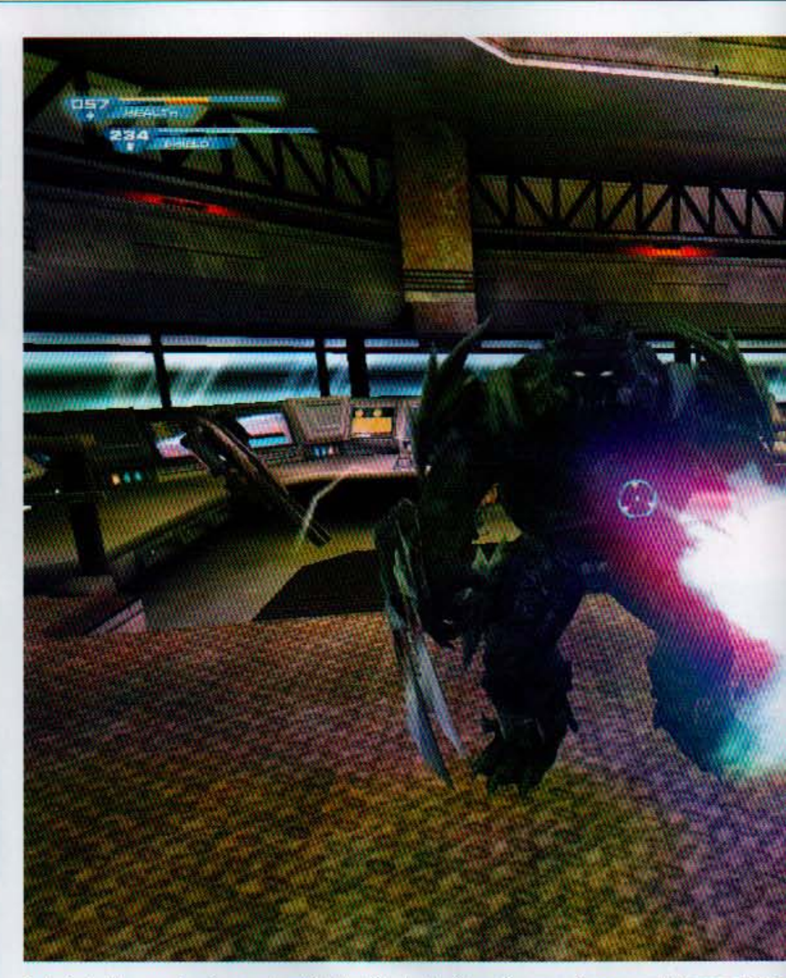




The most interesting missions are those in which NPCs must be strategically directed, but even these are unremarkable in terms of enjoyment

If anything, the game bears a superficial similarity to *Halo* – from the power-suited hero to the architectural and textural details in some of the game's environments. But the comparison is an unfortunate one for *Unreal II*, because it merely serves to reinforce the game's pronounced inferiority. Unlike *Halo*, for example, the threat comes not from the dynamic response of a sophisticated AI, but from a fairly quick succession of rapidly zig-zagging enemies. Which is fine – it makes them reasonably difficult targets to hit (when they don't fall off ledges in their haste) – it's just that it doesn't really help foster any sense of a believable universe or, consequently, aid in developing characters or plot situations that it's possible to care about.

Indeed the story is integrated badly throughout. And while a good story isn't always a prerequisite for a mindlessly entertaining test of trigger-finger reflexes, *Unreal II* forces a poor one on players through cut-scenes and mandatory hub sections that only serve to interrupt the action. Indeed having to engage boring secondary characters in conversation to discover mission objectives feels unnecessarily chore-like, especially when they actually say things such as, "You're the best we've got." These sections simply contribute nothing significant to the action and what they add to the story is largely uninspired and tedious, while the cast of side characters is entirely forgettable, diminishing the impact of the narrative's conclusion.



Technically the game is of course beautiful, but it lacks the interesting uses of space and the more refined visual aesthetics of the original *Unreal*. More significantly it's inferior in terms of play mechanics, even no

Combine this with conservative and linear level design, and the result is a disappointingly average title. The major flaw from a design perspective is that most levels are entirely predictable; the only surprise when you finally reach the sniping section towards the end of the game is that it's taken so long to get there, and it's often possible to second guess the placement of enemies. There's also the disjointed tempo, with successive levels bearing no relationship to preceding ones. It's almost as if Legend assembled separate teams to design each mission, with the result that there's very little continuity running through, and very little in the way of memorable changes of pace or rhythm; encounters just seem to happen and are instantly forgettable.

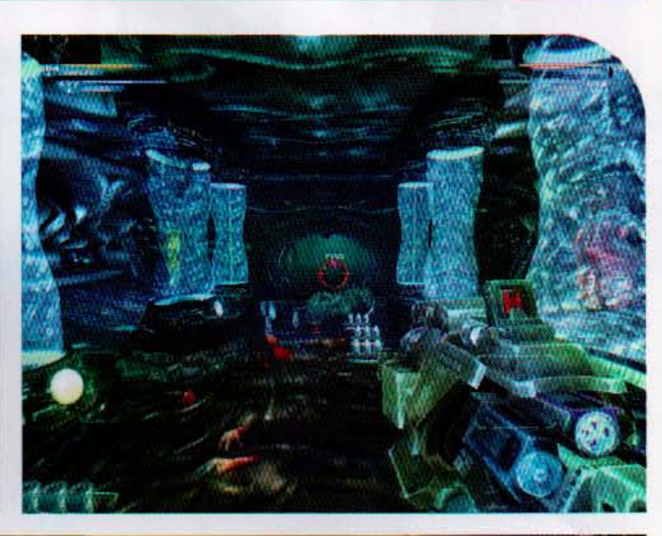
In spite of these flaws the game isn't entirely without merit, and some of the alien enemies and mission objectives are satisfyingly varied. But all things considered it's just not very good, and the absence of a multiplayer component hardly helps. Significantly, the game is less enjoyable as a mindless shooter than both *Quake II* and *Unreal*, and less entertaining as a story-based shooter than *Half-Life*. It's a slightly damning fact that whereas the original *Unreal* was frequently memorable; *Unreal II* is simply all too forgettable. And of the two, the former is still the superior game.

Edge rating: Five out of te

Previously in E99, E107











Although there is a healthy succession of alien foes throughout the game, they lack the dramatic resonance of the Skaarj, who make a relatively brief return and are themselves slightly limp opponents



Boss encounters are, by and large, tedious, and a test of patience rather than skill, though this isn't a complaint that's unique to *Unreal II*. Nevertheless, they do little to offset the game's other shortcomings

Unreally useful tools

Although it's highlighted on the back of the game box, the Unreal Editor isn't accessible through the game's main menu, and it's not as user friendly as something like the *NeverWinter Nights* Aurora toolset. Nevertheless, for budding modmakers it is probably one of the most sophisticated packages for creating firstperson shooters that's currently available, so it offers a substantial attraction in its own right. But unless you're serious about creating content, it's probably not really enough to compensate for the run of the mill singleplayer game.

Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **K2** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E**112, **E**127

W*rath of Heaven* has been created by a team of self-professed *Tenchu* fans and it shows. From start to finish, it's a game that retains the defining characteristics of its two predecessors; right down to the hallmark highs offered by successfully implemented stealth kills. Unfortunately, it also features the lamentable lows of a seismic camera and deficient AI. Like the previous two titles in the series, it's possible to forgive the faults of a game that's rough around the edges and remain confident in the knowledge that, beneath its unpolished exterior, lies a solidly satisfying kernel. But it's far too easy to be put off before this kernel becomes apparent.

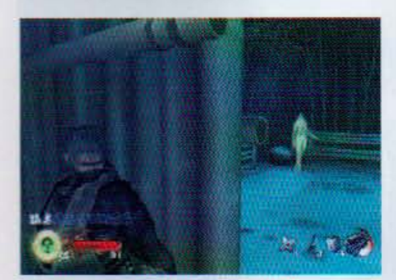
Part of the problem is that missions aren't that much fun the first time around. As with previous *Tenchu* titles, combat is the game's weakest point, despite the introduction of a rudimentary lock-on system. This is a necessity given the need to maintain the onus on avoidance and stealth. But it means that a degree of foreknowledge is required to enjoy the game, and levels are initially undertaken essentially for reconnaissance purposes. In some ways, the structure has been devised around an acceptance of this fact; the three playable characters have their own set of missions, but all take place across the same maps, while high rankings unlock extra and rare items to aid progress through later levels.

Once preliminary forays have been undertaken, the bid to achieve those high rankings is undeniably enthralling stuff, even if it's a bit of a memory test. But initial outings are, for the most part, riddled with frustrations borne of inconsistent AI and a camera that makes ascertaining the lay of the land nigh on impossible. And although these certainly aren't problems that are unique to *Wrath of Heaven*, they are especially pronounced here, and exacerbated by boss encounters that are, without exception, remarkably limp.

For anyone patient enough to stick with the game in spite of these disappointments though, *WoH* certainly offers a decent and lengthy challenge – even considering the fact that the much vaunted multiplayer modes – both co-operative and versus – are little more than tacked-on extras. But really, Activision and K2 could have spent some time polishing up the game's presentation, tidying up the camera, removing some very basic errors of level design and extending the palette beyond a murky and indistinguishable range of browns and greys.

Edge rating: Six out of ten













The game's technical shortcomings (including some prominent bouts of slowdown) are, by and large, offset by some genuinely satisfying moments. While Rikimaru and Ayame return, they're joined by a new character, called Tesshu, who offers a subtly different playing style

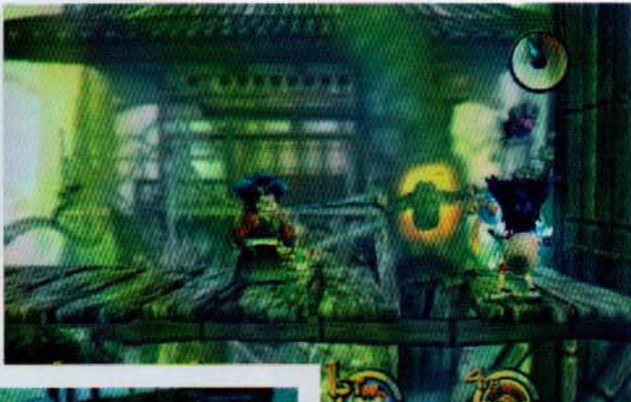
Erase and rewind

Once a mission has started in *Tenchu: WoH*, the only way to restart, or indeed go back to the main menu, is to allow your character to be killed. Apparently, the official reason for this is that, as a ninja simulation, it doesn't make sense for the game to allow players to restart when things don't go their way. But for a game in which much of the pleasure is derived from repeated attempts to perform perfectly, it makes no sense to disallow players from restarting time-consuming missions that they've played several times before. Such a small oversight has a disproportionately frustrating impact.

Kung Fu Chaos

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft** Developer: **Just Add Monsters** Price: **£40** Release: **April 11** Previously in **E110**, **E112**







Each game stage is rated from 'straight-to-video' (one star) up to a 'colossal hit' (five stars)







Replay more

After completing each stage (or 'wrap', in keeping with the game's make-a-movie theme), you're offered an inspired playback of your efforts on the set. It's more than just your typical series of arty camera angles, though – the footage is coated in a veneer of smudged, crackling seventies authenticity, and colourful commentary is provided by megamouth director Shao Ting.



The considerable oneplayer campaign consists of a string of mini-games, out-and-out arena combat and battles across lively movie sets



"Loading. Make ready!" A game hasn't managed to burgle popular culture as wittily and capably as this since *Vice City*. *Kung Fu Chaos* utilises eastern martial arts movies, circa 1980, as a source of genuinely inane entertainment, as opposed to a cheap hook and an easy ad campaign. As a lampoon of chop-socky thwaxploitation, it's accomplished; more 'Kentucky Fried Movie' than 'Kung Pow', and from the Lalo Schifrin-licenced 'Enter The Dragon' theme tune to the glorious use of Engrish, the degree of homage to the source material is impressive.

Its credentials as a game, and not just a silicon fanzine, aren't quite as striking, but bear the weight of keen scrutiny all the same. Thankfully, it harks back to *Power Stone* more than both *Fuzion Frenzy* and *Whacked!* in terms of multiplayer arena combat, where the aim is to create the most chaotic, action-packed movie available. The esoteric art of Button Bash is available, but is easily warded against through the surprisingly complex system of combat. You can guard, throw, flick quick attacks, counter and gather strength with some well-timed taunts; 360 degree attacks will push foes away, but won't do a serious amount of damage, thus preventing any such manoeuvre becoming a tedious tactic. Ironically, it tries its best to defy the limitations of the traditionally-dull party game genre, unlike the conformist straight-to-video kung fu kitsch upon which it's based. While this layer of depth isn't unwelcome, it still doesn't prevent the game becoming a mess during its more raucous moments.

That said, *Kung Fu Chaos* makes up for lack of substance with sheer fizz. It's infused with colourful bubbles of imagination and a tirade of knowing references. Battles that take place across entire chunks of movie scenery are a continuous procession of delightful set-pieces, and any lack of subtlety is quickly drowned out by a cacophony of shrill combat yells and punchy carrot-snap sound effects.

It's a well-rounded and charming offering that will get thumbs thumping. After the abomination of *Kakuto Chojin*, *Kung Fu Chaos* helps restore some faith in Microsoft Game Studios, giving Xbox an admirable tick to add to its self-conscious genre checklist. It manages to be both brash and considerate, but don't spend too much time concentrating on the finger, or you'll miss all the heavenly glory of slavishly crafted software; it's still best played drunken style.

Edge rating: **Seven** out of te

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Raven Shield

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Ubi Soft** Developer: **Red Storm** Price: **£30** Release: **March 21** Previously in **E**112, **E**119

Unreal II isn't the only FPS that's been developed with the Unreal Engine to be reviewed this issue, though it's kind of ironic that *Raven Shield* should prove the superior of the two. Branding issues aside, *Unreal* attempts to marry two fashionable themes in FPS development – story-driven scripting and instinctual blasting – whereas the distinctive blend of strategy and squad-based action that characterises *Rainbow Six* titles has proved resolutely unfashionable over the years. But though it's been a long wait for the latest instalment, on balance it's been worth it. While *Raven Shield* doesn't offer anything substantive to the formula, it certainly proves its continued appeal.

In truth, the game isn't too much of a departure from its *Rainbow Six* predecessors; certainly anyone who's played any of those will be on familiar ground when it comes to mastering its combination of planning and action. Of course the major difference is the use of the aforementioned Unreal Engine, which does lend a new level of verisimilitude to operations – as do the enhanced arsenal and inventories, an improved quick-command interface, and, to a certain extent at least, the narrative that arcs across the 15 singleplayer missions. Indeed though the latter is rather predictable Clancyesque intrigue, its impact is partly reinforce by the need to keep your sidekicks alive lest they be replaced with unskilled cannon-fodder.

The problem, if there is one, is that this combination of realism and meticulous planning – as well as the lack of any sort of save after the action portion of missions commences – rather exposes the game's AI coding. Though it would probably go unnoticed in conventional FPS titles, the occasional flaws in both team-mate and enemy behaviour is sometimes all too obvious, with enemies ignoring threats, and team-mates getting stuck going through doors for example.

But while there's no diminishing the importance of such a weakness, there's also no doubting the satisfying scope of the game; the open-ended nature of planning sections opens up considerable replay value, to add to that of multiplayer missions and several additional ways to replay completed missions.

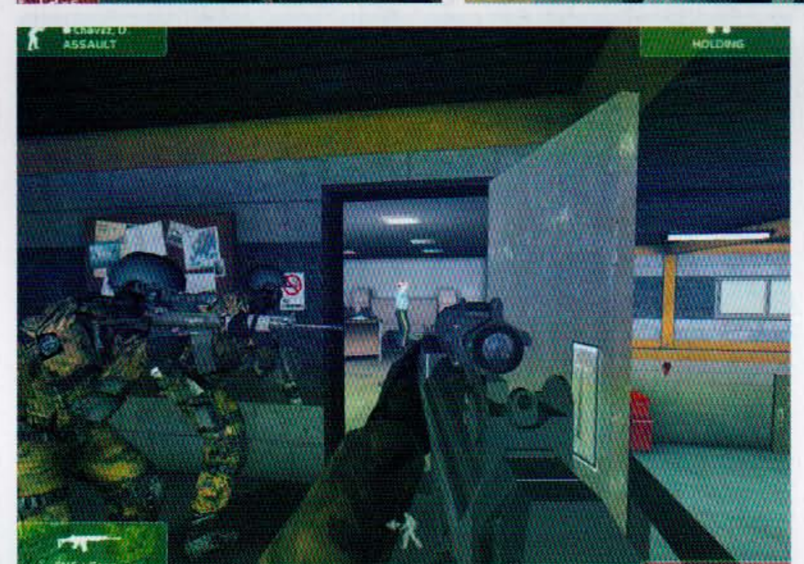
And although the emphasis on prior planning might not be universally appealing, it's still pretty satisfying.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten





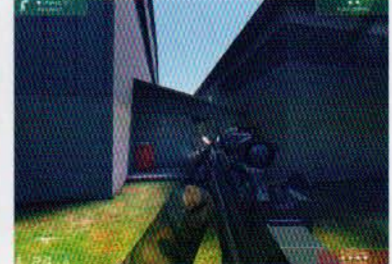






Raven Shield is another testament to Epic's impressive Unreal Engine, remedying the rather basic visuals of the previous *Rainbow Six* titles





Frustratingly, your team-mates occasionally exhibit a degree of stupidity that's perhaps more befitting of crack addled special ops, though not often enough for it to be a significantly offensive drawback

Unreally useful tools

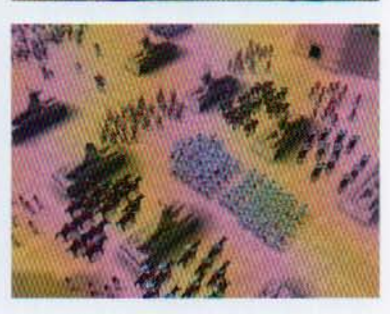
And just as *Unreal II* isn't the only FPS to have been developed using the Unreal Engine, it's also not the only game reviewed this month to ship with the Unreal editor. In case you'd forgotten, it's one of the most versatile and feature-rich tools around for the budding mod-maker. And as well as testifying to the ubiquity of Epic's engine coding skills, it also, in this instance, comes attached to a game that's rather impressive.

Praetorians

Format: PC Publisher: **Eidos Interactive** Developer: **Pyro Studios** Price: **£30** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E**83, **E**108







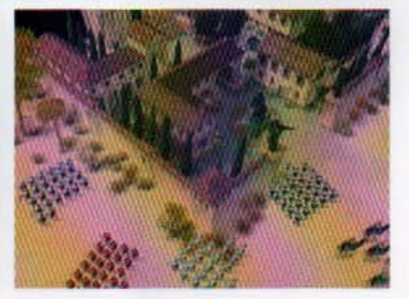




The 24 mission singleplayer campaign takes in Gaul, Egypt, and Roman, and charts Caesar's rise to power with some degree of authenticity







If there is a distinguishing feature of *Praetorians*, it's the well-worked siege sections. But in general, despite Pyro's best efforts, the game is ultimately generic, and does little to remedy the faults of the genre

As a fairly typical RTS, it's difficult to find fault with *Praetorians*. After such a prolonged gestation period (**Edge** first saw a work in progress back in **E**83), it's no surprise that the game is extremely polished, but it's also very 'of-the-minute'. Pyro has taken the modish decision to pare down the base-building aspect of the genre, choosing instead to focus on increasing the tactical complexity of the conflict. But in spite of its uniquely effective recreation of siege encounters, and its historical authenticity and polish, *Praetorians* ultimately exposes the weaknesses which lie at the very heart of the genre.

Building armies in *Praetorians* is a simple task. Each unit has a certain population cost and is drawn from villages or barracks, which have a finite but recharging population. With only one resource to worry about, the focus is on mobilising the specific strengths of each unit; from Legionnaires (who can adopt a defensive tortoise formation, or soften up opponents with javelins before charging), to auxiliary units (who can build siege machinery with which to capture enemy fortifications).

Marshalling these units and other special forces such as centurions and scouts is essential to success, as is taking advantage of the lay of the 3D environments. Although these environments feel small compared to those in *Total War*, they offer scope for various types of ambush. There are rarely any interface obstacles, and a well-written tutorial introduces the nuances of the respective units. Indeed, it's difficult to find any major weaknesses in either the singleplayer campaign or multiplayer skirmishes (which feature Barbarians and Egyptians as well as the staple Roman forces). And it's clear from the outset that the game is a labour of love, resulting in pronounced historical detail.

Nevertheless, *Praetorians* suffers from one major failing which is that the emphasis on realtime decision-making diminishes the capacity for strategic depth and satisfaction. It's a problem which is characteristic of the genre and, although it has been solved to a certain extent by *Warcraft III* (which sticks to simple and understandable ecology of units) or *Medieval: Total War* (which features the simple ability to pause the game and distribute orders), it's not a problem that has been solved by the developer of *Praetorians*. Which is a mighty shame, because in every other respect it's a first rate title.

Edge rating: Six out of te

Command & Conquer: Generals

Format: PC Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Developer: **EA Pacific** Price: **£35** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E**112, **E**114

Games typically exist in a kind of cultural and political vacuum – rare excursions to page two of the 'Daily Mail' for the latest shock 'em up aside. Even supposedly real-world wargames tend to tiptoe around specific references while still aiming to cash in on a public with a mindset geared towards armed conflict: not so the latest in the *C&C* franchise. Veering from the slightly fantastical settings of the previous titles, *Generals* depicts the large-scale antics of a fictional terrorist group, the Global Liberation Army, which attacks with chemical weapons, SCUDs and suicide bombers, and is based in Baghdad. *Generals'* aim couldn't be clearer.

Crucially, one of the three campaigns puts you in charge of the GLA, and so missions demanding that you kill civilians ensue. Naturally, your opponents – the US and China – are on the side of all that's good and holy, so stay just about on the right side of the Geneva Convention. Each brief, linear campaign is well designed and scripted, steering away from the base-building dynamic that originally defined the genre. Perhaps the game's finest achievement is in the balancing of the units available to each side. Considering the deliberate skewing towards extreme combat effectiveness to prevent defensive tactics, and the heavily differentiated approach in terms of men and machinery on each side, the fact that no side is noticeably stronger overall is impressive.

As such, the game is at its best in multiplayer. Tank-rushes, a tactic which once threatened to capsize the genre, are ineffectual despite the weak base defences on offer. Instead, you're required to seek out specific units' special abilities and use them precisely to gain an advantage. Skirmish games fail to be quite as satisfying due to efficient yet unimaginative AI.

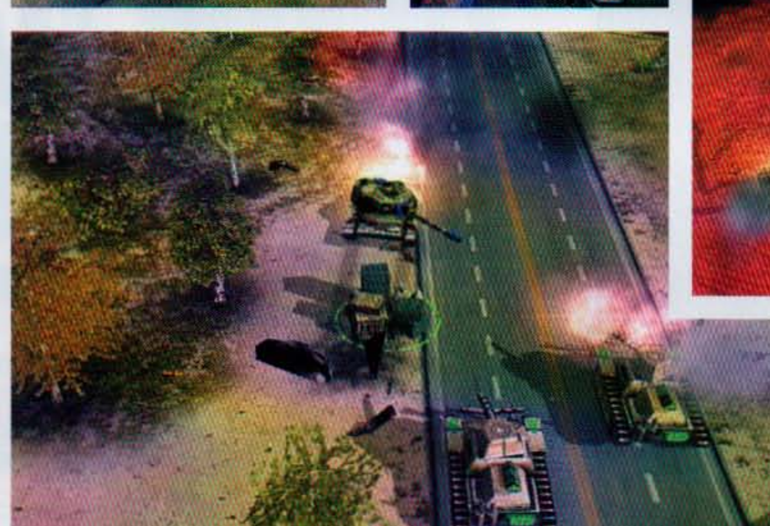
Much good work is overshadowed by the topical overtones, though. The mere use of anthrax warheads and terror tactics isn't the problem, it's the implementation that's likely to cause offence, from the chest-thumping intro film to the fact that you're required to do unpalatable things to progress. Whereas many strategy games transcend the setting and methods involved to become an exercise of the imagination, *Generals* adheres all too closely to its subject matter, seeming to revel in the horrors of modern war. And while **Edge** likes a fight as much as the next man, the smell of blood still makes us queasy.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten













Bilious green glows indicate the Global Liberation Army's use of toxic goo, either from converted tractor-like vehicles or SCUD missiles. Hans Blix and his UN weapons inspectors would appreciate such clarity

Individual units aren't quite clever enough to pick their targets effectively. This Chinese flame tank devastates infantry but only chars structures



Generally speaking

The system of generalship implied by the title and long-promised by EA has turned out to be less significant than we'd hoped. Throughout the course of a mission you gain what are essentially experience points as you destroy your enemies; as these accumulate you're able to select special attacks or units (depending on the side you're playing as) such as stealthy snipers, parachute reinforcements, airstrikes and more powerful vehicles.

Vexx

Format: **Xbox (version tested), PS2, GC** Publisher: **Acclaim** Developer: **In-house (Acclaim Studios Austin)** Price: **£40** Release: **April 4** Previously in **E**108

Here's a tip for anyone currently developing a 3D platform game: make sure the camera can be placed directly behind the main character at all times. It's a simple dictum but one that's frequently overlooked by developers. Bizarrely, *Vexx* actually seems to go out of its way to annoy the player. Acclaim Studios Austin obviously took the game's title to heart.

While manual camera control has been implemented (on the right analogue stick), it doesn't work in all places at all times. Often, a dramatic viewpoint is automatically selected, and the camera just flits around dementedly like a moth on fire. Which is a real shame because *Vexx* has its imaginative moments.

The structure has been ripped straight from *Super Mario 64* (no bad thing) although it's hearts that are collected rather than stars. The similarities even extend to the inclusion of mini-games and the unlocking of further levels once a certain number of hearts are secured. Unfortunately *Vexx* lurches from the decent to the downright ridiculous, especially for the hearts requiring a series of pixel perfect jumps without the support of a friendly perspective. It's not *Mario*-lite, but it certainly rhymes with that.

Edge rating: Three out of ten









It's all about fairness. A challenge is one thing, but making the player leap into the unknown or moving the perspective mid-jump just isn't any fun. Which is a crying shame because some of *Vexx*'s levels show a degree of inventiveness that even the mighty *Jak and Daxter* lacks. The variety is welcome, but the world's creatures are the worst Edge has seen since *Ephemeral Fantasia* (see E101)

The Sims

Format: **Xbox (version tested), GC, PS2** Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Developer: **Edge Of Reality** Price: **£40** Release: **April 4 (Xbox, GC), Out now (PS2)**





Hell is other people; the twoplayer split-screen mode feels cramped, paltry and defunct. It galls slightly that no efforts have been made to utilise the emergent online potential of the host consoles





Like *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*, concessions have been made to make the *Sims* experience more palatable for menu-phobic console gamers. The main thrust of this is the 'Get A Life' mode, where predefined criteria have to be met to progress through life. This completely contradicts the game's attraction, which is an unfettered case study into your own mind. Instead, it tries to lead you by the hand, despite your instinct to have a freeform grope of human interaction and possibility. There is a more open-ended mode available, where you build and nurture an entire neighbourhood, and within which you can play with more freedom. But even then, it still feels slightly hemmed in.

The control method is adequate and doesn't add any lag to the experience. But other things do, such as the harsh cap that's put on the amount of furniture you're allowed. Maybe more useful concessions should have been made, such as including some of the myriad expansion packs available. Despite running in full 3D, it still looks nothing more impressive than an aged PC experience awkwardly repackaged for a new audience. Nevertheless, it's certainly still entertaining and is a unique offering for console owners.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Super Mario Bros.

Edge takes a fresh look at a seminal game classic from yesteryear

Format: **Famicom** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **In-house** Release: **1985**

Nintendo may be about to launch its successful Famicom system in the States, but some rebranding (to the Nintendo Entertainment System) and the addition of a Robot Operating Buddy (ROB) is unlikely to drag the US videogame industry out of the doldrums. But *Super Mario Bros.* just might.

Super Mario Bros. retains all the charm of *Donkey Kong* and *Donkey Kong Jr.* but the platform dynamic has been spiced up with the addition of side-scrolling. Rather than climbing to the top of a single screen, Mario is now free to roam through his world to a breathtaking degree.

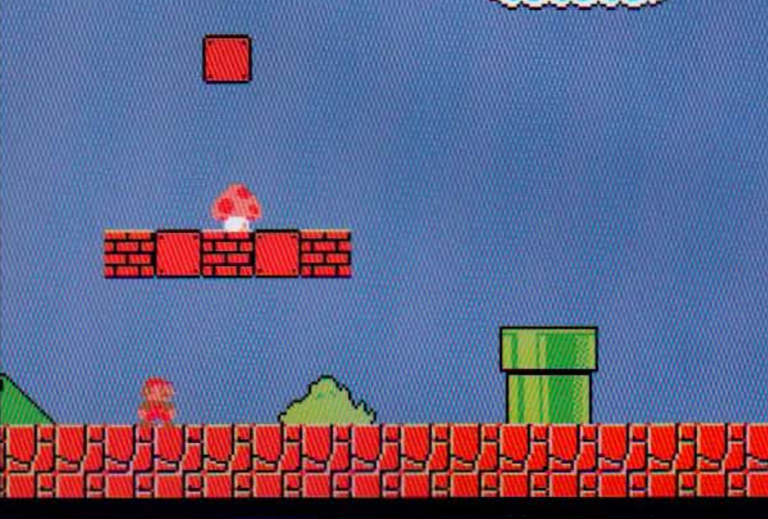
While 'world' may seem grandiose, it's an apt term to describe the transformation that side-scrolling has brought about. The camera follows the main character through a vibrant universe populated by mean mushrooms (Goombas), ravenous flowers (Piranha plants) and angry turtles (Koopas). Welcome to the Mushroom Kingdom, a destination somewhere between your most vivid dreams and the New York sewage system. As Mario, you must brave this realm and rescue Princess Peach from the clutches of evil Bowser.

The vitality, cleverness, and execution strike you from the first instant. Even the main character's movement has been infused with a kinetic energy that makes leaping around the caverns, lakes and skies an absolute joy. There are eight intricate worlds to explore, each with sub-levels, and NCL has completely broken with convention by allowing the player to skip to later worlds through warp zones.

Indeed, this is *Super Mario Bros.*'s most astounding feature. There are so many routes, hidden secrets and warp pipes that you'll be coming back for more long after defeating fire-spitting Bowser and his horde of minions. Break an unassuming brick and it can provide you with a power-up (a green mushroom will see Mario doubling in size) or even produce a beanstalk that can transport you to a secret realm.

Attention to detail is remarkable and despite the surreal setting everything works with an exemplary logic and consistency. *SMB* demands your attention and is destined to shape the future of all platform titles. And with it, Nintendo deserves to conquer America.

Edge rating: Ten out of ten





As Mario's a plumber, he knows a thing or two about pipes, but these pipes?



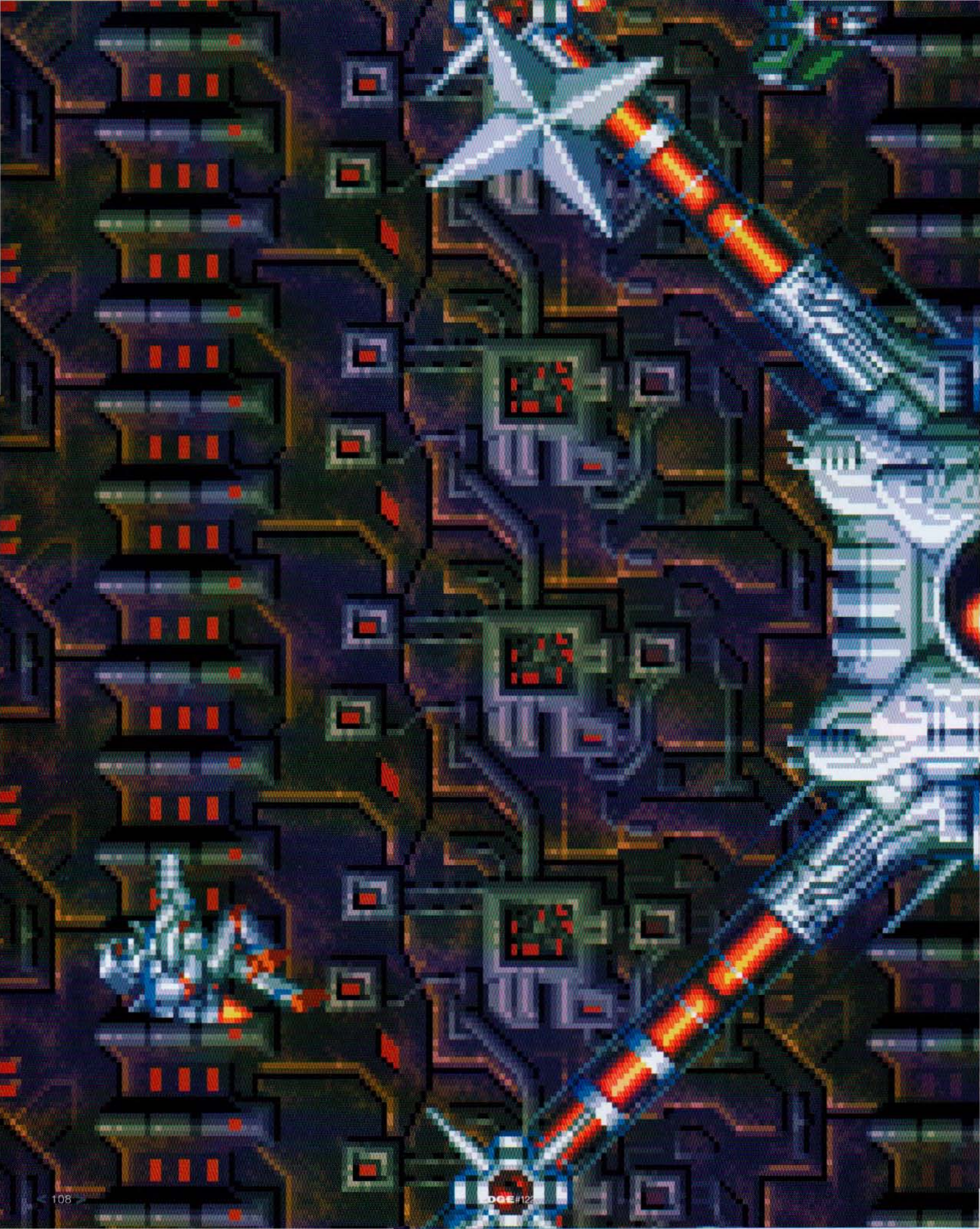
Jump on a Koopa's head and its empty shell can be kicked into other enemies

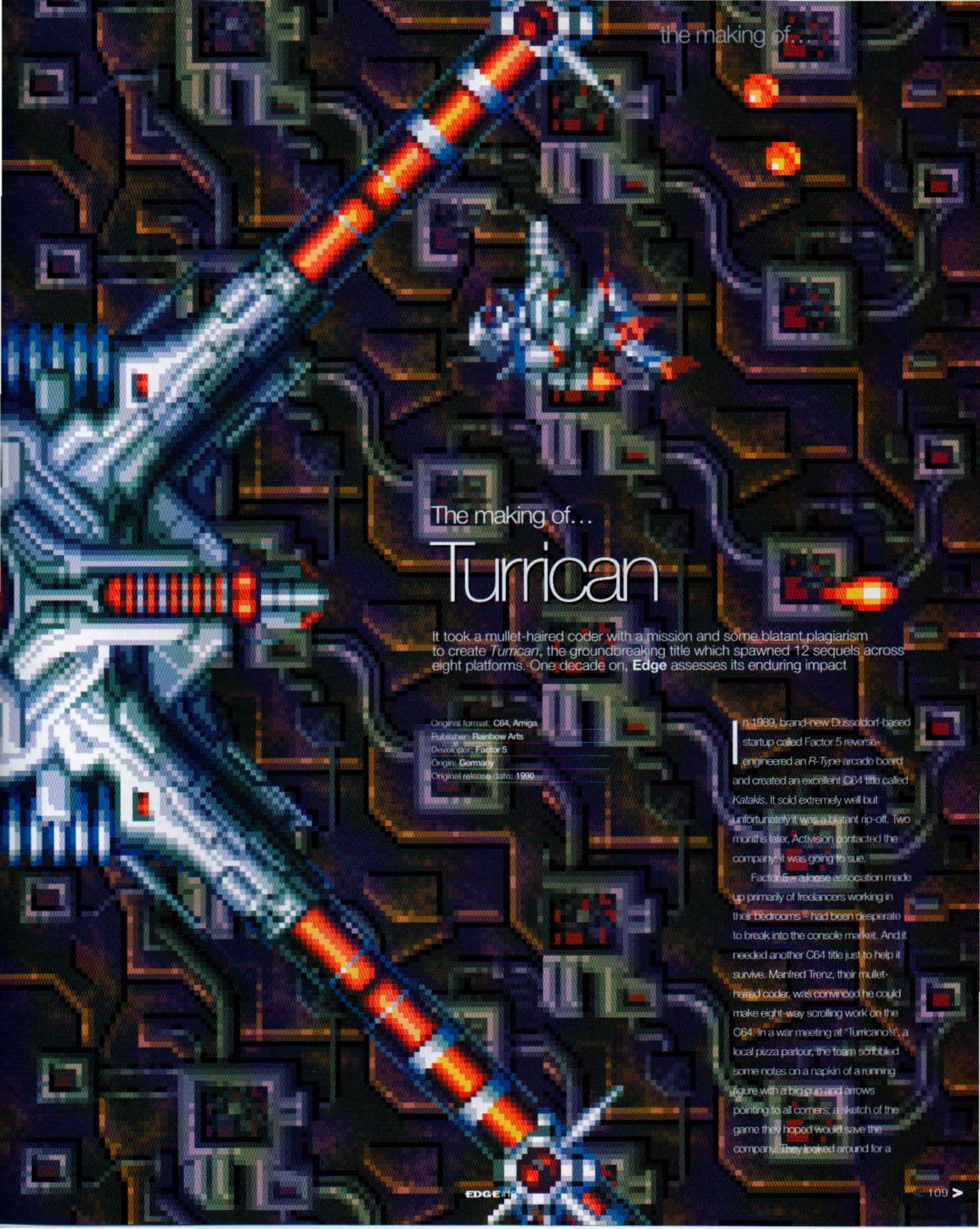
ge won't reveal how you find the inus' world – it's all part of the fun

Sale of the century

nd it did. *Super Mario Bros.* went on o become the biggest selling ideogame of all time (conservative stimates put the number at 40m opies) and helped Nintendo achieve a tranglehold over the US market gainst all expectations. The game is till enjoyable today, but inevitably was uperceded by other 2D platformers hat took the formula and repackaged it ith even more elaborate secrets and aster eggs. Arguably, however, none uite captured the charm evident in this nd subsequent Nintendo sequels.







The making of…

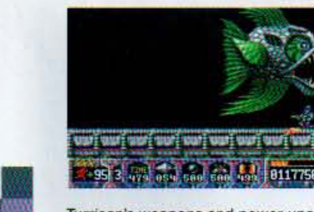
Turrican

It took a mullet-haired coder with a mission and some blatant plagiarism to create *Turrican*, the groundbreaking title which spawned 12 sequels across eight platforms. One decade on, **Edge** assesses its enduring impact

Original format: **C64, Amiga**
Publisher: **Rainbow Arts**
Developer: **Factor 5**
Origin: **Germany**
Original release date: **1990**

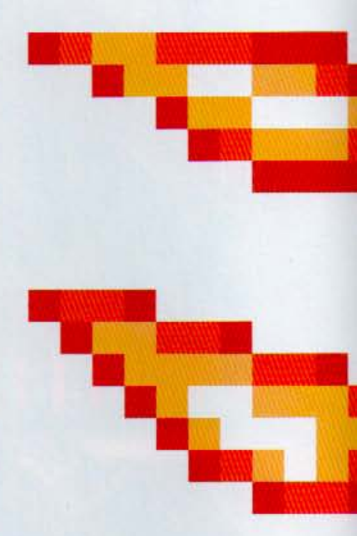
In 1989, brand-new Dusseldorf-based startup called Factor 5 reverse-engineered an *R-Type* arcade board and created an excellent C64 title called *Katakis*. It sold extremely well but unfortunately it was a blatant rip-off. Two months later, Activision contacted the company: it was going to sue.

Factor 5 – a loose association made up primarily of freelancers working in their bedrooms – had been desperate to break into the console market. And it needed another C64 title just to help it survive. Manfred Trenz, their mullet-haired coder, was convinced he could make eight-way scrolling work on the C64. In a war meeting at 'Turricano's', a local pizza parlour, the team scribbled some notes on a napkin of a running figure with a big gun and arrows pointing to all corners; a sketch of the game they hoped would save the company. They looked around for a






Turrican's weapons and power-ups were simply awesome at the time and had been designed to "make you feel good". Hidden caves and secret weapons encouraged re-play and exploration



name and, on the spot, *Turrican* was born. At *Turrican*'s launch in 1990, the game – which was to spawn 12 sequels across eight platforms, and cause at least two injuries in the crush by its stand at a Cologne computer fair – was hailed as a groundbreaking title. As it later turned out, though, pretty much everything in *Turrican* was stolen from elsewhere; only this time Factor 5 had been just a little more careful about its influences.

In one corner of Factor 5's local Dusseldorf arcade there was an odd Data East import: a little-known *Rygar*-style sideways scrolling shooter called *Psycho Nic Oscar*. "Play that," says **Julian Eggebrecht**, who produced *Turrican* for Factor 5, "and a lot of *Turrican* will become clear. There's even a character in the background that looks, shall we say, a little like the *Turrican* player." The team began collecting other features they liked, from numerous games. Manfred Trenz loved the jumping in the *Mario* games. So in it went. A lightning weapon they loved in the Dusseldorf arcade soon appeared in *Turrican* too. They took the character design and pacing from *Psycho Nic*, the searching from *Metroid* and the leaping and exploration from *Mario*. Even the title screen and logo were cribbed from a heavy metal album cover (Man-o-War's 'Kings of Metal'). But despite such skulduggery, the combination they made was something entirely new.

The result was that *Turrican* became huge. We'd all moved little men from left to right before – some months it felt like that was all we did – but we'd never had such a massive selection of power-ups or been able to explore such a huge field of play – over 1,200 screens in eight-way free-scrolling splendour. And the levels were worth exploring; at the end of every narrow cave or crazy stepping-stone stairway there was always another even wilder power-up.

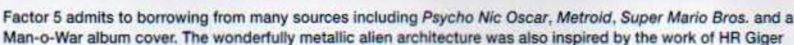
There was, of course, the usual plausibly written back story; the three-headed Morgul, source of all the fears and nightmares of mankind, had escaped. And guess who was the only man with a Titan combat suit and the courage to fight back? But with or without realistic justification, fight back was what you did; leaping and slashing your way through five worlds (each personally designed by trained structural draughtsman Manfred Trenz) to encounter radically different moods in ever-changing enemies doing their best to win favour from Morgul by taking you down. There was the awesome steel fist, the great piranha, the metal spider with monster claws, the hydra, and of course the cause of all your nightmares – Morgul himself. To give you courage, your beautifully animated Titan combat suit had a 'Thundercats'-style 'Flash of Lightning' attack, as well as mines, grenades and a long lightsabre. And three times in each life you could ram the joystick down, tap the space bar and go into gyroscope – a whirling and invincible ninja star.

"The weapons were all designed to make you feel good," remembers Eggebrecht, "and they were arguably the most satisfying C64 weapons to date. At the time, the most advanced game on the C64 was *Hawkeye* from Thalamus. That was by Mario Van Zeist, a crazy Dutch guy, and a big inspiration for Manfred on what could be done."

By late 1989, Manfred Trenz had locked himself and his mullet in a room. "When he came out," recalls Eggebrecht, "he said, 'I can do this on the C64. I can do eight-way scrolling'."

While Trenz was working on the C64 version of *Turrican*, the rest of Factor 5 (all four of them) were working desperately to finish the Amiga version of *R-Type*. Activision had been so impressed with Factor 5's Amiga coding skills in *Katakis* that it had finally agreed to let them keep selling the game, if they could code an Amiga *R-Type* for Activision within three months. It was early December 1989. "Manfred would be done with the C64 in March 1990," remembers Eggebrecht. Then suddenly, inspired by the scale of the Amiga's success in Germany, the company decided to try to launch *Turrican* on Commodore's 16-bit platform at the same time. "We wanted to launch simultaneously, " says Eggebrecht. "We had four months. Nowadays, to do a port, you can re-use code. Then we couldn't. We had to do a complete rewrite." This pressured period is the producer's worst memory of his career. "Nobody had really thought to do

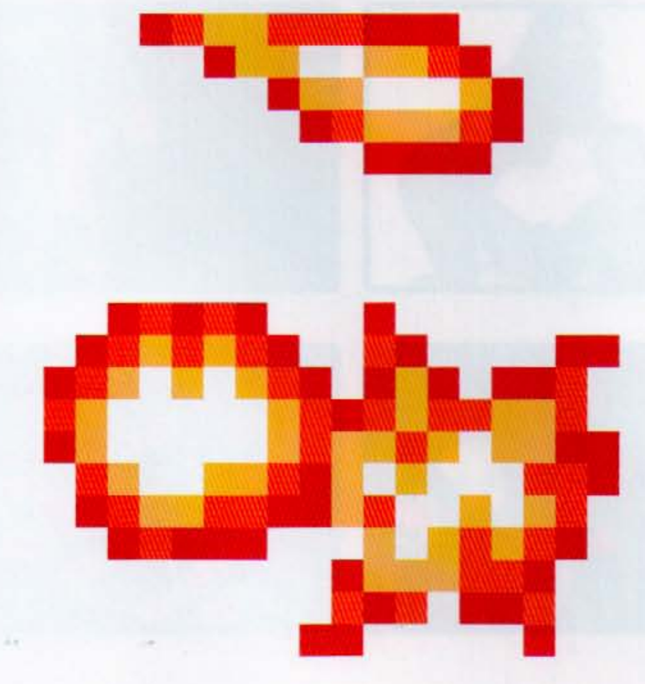




Factor 5 admits to borrowing from many sources including *Psycho Nic Oscar*, *Metroid*, *Super Mario Bros.* and a Man-o-War album cover. The wonderfully metallic alien architecture was also inspired by the work of HR Giger



"They took the character design and pacing from *Psycho Nic*, the searching from *Metroid* and the leaping and exploration from *Mario*. Even the title screen and logo were cribbed from a heavy metal album cover"



an Amiga version, then we had to pull it together and make it something special in four months. It was insane."

There were technical barriers too. *Turrican* was the first C64 title with true parallax scrolling. On the Amiga, this proved a major stumbling block. "Vertical parallax scrolling is very hard on the Amiga," says Eggebrecht. "There are probably only ten titles in total which manage it properly. In the end we built the scrolling from sprites, but it was very hard. Especially coming straight out of the crunch-time in *R-Type* to the crunch-time for *Turrican*." After that now-nostalgic problem – collision detection – Manfred Trenz puts the controls of a game as the highest priority. Julian Eggebrecht agrees. "Jumping is key to making something fun. Look at how the fun of jumping develops from the early *Mario* games. At first he falls too fast; the jumping's not right. By *Yoshi's Island* the jump is so refined; you push the button and the character jumps. It's all about that responsiveness. But to translate that on to a C64 joystick, with no second button: that's a huge issue." The Amiga and C64 versions of *Turrican* had slightly different interpretations of this problem, which also turned out to be the downfall of the early console conversions of the game. Accolade, who was given the licence to port *Turrican* to the Genesis, kept the jumping controls on the pad. "It was a key problem of their version of the game," Eggebrecht remembers. In fact, having wanted to work on consoles right from the start, the Accolade version of *Turrican* is still a thorn in Factor 5's side. "We were massive console fans," says Eggebrecht, "and while we were working on *Turrican 2*, on the platforms which were famous in Europe, we were begging Rainbow Arts to let us do the console. It sold the rights to Accolade. We were hugely upset. We would have known how much to improve the games from the Amiga, but Accolade's ports were worse. The Genesis version of *Turrican* actually looks worse than the Amiga version. On *Turrican 2* it slapped the 'Universal Soldier' licence on a terrible version of *Turrican 2*. We cried."

Eggebrecht remembers that after the tough development of *Turrican*, on the Amiga at least, *Turrican 2* was a breeze. "When *Turrican* happened, it was a real struggle, and we were all overwhelmed at how successful it was. Then the whole team really clicked, we were all firing off on the same cylinders. We said 'let's do a sequel'. *Turrican 2* shipped eight months later." The game was so anticipated that at the pre-launch demo in Cologne, two people suffered injuries in the race to get hold of one of the 900 copies. And by the time *Turrican 3* was in development Factor 5 had 25,000 pre-orders before the game was completed. The sequels developed their own momentum but the Factor 5 team began to drift apart. It is the first two games it looks back on most proudly.

"*Turrican 1* was a struggle. We got to the end, we looked at it, and we thought, 'Wow, this is actually pretty good'. My best memory is developing *Turrican 2*. It was a great ride. Sometimes you work on a project and know while you're doing it that it's something great and very special. We had that on *Turrican 2*. To this day people come up to us, especially Europeans, and say, 'Can I have your autograph?' – it's great. I love to sign a box of *Turrican*."

So is there anything that people might not have discovered in the original? Eggebrecht doesn't think so. "People have played it so much, I think everything has been found." In fact, the developer even hid an anti-piracy message in English which was buried deep in the code. It read: "All the game design, technical problems and much more took a lot of time and was very often nerve-racking! So do me a favour and don't crack this game!". It then included a phone number on it, intended as a joke Samaritans line for any would-be-hackers which was in fact the number for Manfred's home phone. The team never expected it, but – and this is perhaps the biggest tribute of all – people still call.

RESET

Where yesterday's gaming goes to have a lie down

reload

Examining gaming history from **Edge**'s perspective, five years ago this month



Issue 58, May 1998

Edge doesn't make films, but if it did, Out There would definitely be the director. "Sandra Bullock meets Marky Mark in a Trappist monastery," was its pitch for the 'Tomb Raider' film, and **Edge** can't help but think that it might have been more fun than, "A dusty Angelina Jolie shoots and pouts a bit". Also entertaining was Charlie Brooker's post-apocalyptic advert for CEX, written when nuclear war seemed like a perfectly silly scenario. Ah, 1998: how young we were.

Talking of innocence, let's look at the Prescreens. In-depth looks at *Metal Gear Solid* and *Urban Chaos* (then called *City of the Fallen*) were intriguing, glances at *Army Men* and *Superman 64* a little less so. All of which illustrates that previews often provide little indication of a game's true worth. A feature called 'Digital Disasters' talked to the creators of *Rise of the Robots*, *Battle Cruiser 3000AD*, and *World Cup Carnival*. And another part of the strangely familiar Development Hell-esque article laid into Ocean's *Epic*: "the manual was a shoddy affair… for 'ion' the glossary read 'a particle of fill-in later'". All fine, but if you turn to page 91 and the review of *Dead or Alive*…

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?
"To criticise something is easy. To praise something is very difficult. You must look at *Rise of the Robots* in context." Peter Jones, managing director of Mirage, explains the game's 'mixed' reception

DID EDGE REALLY SAY THAT?
"jhg gkjg oiyug lk jkj glk the caption for this thing jhg gkjg oiyug lk jkj glk the caption for this thing fdsfdfsfsfsfdsfdsf" The captions for the review of *Dead or Alive*, aka the sound of smug writing coming back so smack **Edge** on the nose

TESTSCREENS (AND RATINGS)
Tekken 3 (9/10, PS), *Motorhead* (7/10, PS), *Dead or Alive* (8/10, Saturn), *Bushido Blade 2* (8/10, PS), *Need for Speed 3* (7/10, PS), *Interstate '76: Nitro Riders* (8/10, PC), *Dark Reign: Rise of the Shadowhand* (8/10, PC), *Alundra* (6/10, PS), *Wetrix* (7/10, N64), *Deathtrap Dungeon* (7/10, PS), *Tenchu* (7/10, PS)



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1. Kelly Brook takes the real life role of Eidos' Red Lotus
2. *Tekken 3*: "Make no mistake, the master has returned"
3. Bruno Bonnell, chairman of Infogrames, celebrates the death of TV
4. Hideo Kojima shows off his retro collection
5. The N64's *Superman 64*: yesterday's *Kabuki Warriors*
6. The N64's *Wetrix*: Yesterday's *Aqua Aqua*

pixelperfect

The industry's favourites from yesteryear. This month, Simon Byron, winner of **Edge**'s 2002 Best Press Release of the Year award





Scramble: Byron's inspiration. Years of chip waste consumption have made him blind though

It's difficult to retain any real clarity; we're talking well over two-thirds of my life ago. Was it tatty? Probably. The location – what's currently known as The Galley chip shop in Bournemouth – certainly was. We only used to hang around there to get free 'scraps' – essentially the waste product of chip production, not fit for human consumption. It's a wonder we didn't die of heart attacks, aged eight. Being of an inquisitive nature, I used to wonder what the Bigger Boys were doing in the corner. And for months, I just watched; marvelling at their collective talent. But like most drugs, the very first shot was free.

After the discovery of that abandoned credit, I was completely and utterly hooked. Konami's *Scramble*, it was – the birth of my obsession with videogames. Sure, I'd toyed with the ZX81 before. But never had I witnessed such glorious 'arcade quality' visuals. I remember it being rock hard. To this day, I've only made it to the final 'maze' stage two or three times. Ahead of its time, it combined classic shoot 'em up mechanics with resource management. If you were being obsequious, you could argue it was the father of the strategy game. Which I do. Frequently.

I've long since progressed from *Scramble*. But in a sense it taught me how to love. Games, that is.



Communicate by post:
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edge@futurenet.co.uk

Thank you, Edge. Thank you so much. Ironic as it was to use *DOAXBV* as the cover-image for such an insightful, blissfully equitable female-themed issue, it gave much-needed attention to and recognition of females in the industry, and remained non-sexist while simultaneously and mercifully avoiding the sort of vitriolic feminist bile that game grrrlz so often spout.

In all my years of reading **Edge** I have seen exactly four Inbox letters from women (comfortably gender-ambiguous forenames like 'Sam' and 'Danny' aside). At first glance it would seem as if we are few and far between in the industry, whether as consumers or active participants; the typically male-dominated image that the games industry impresses on the impartial eye does little to change that perception. But what many of us know, and what issue **E**121 did a very good job of pointing out, is that we are more numerous than we seem. Hidden behind the endless droves of male-orientated advertising efforts, trade shows and magazines, there is a surprisingly large dedicated faction of female hardcore gamers who put up with it all for the love of gaming. Because we are not specifically acknowledged or catered for, the industry and the public at large seem to assume that we don't exist; hence, gaming retains its male-dominated image when, in fact, that situation has changed.

Women are playing games and changing the industry, despite the fact that everything about it is designed to cater for men; when the industry actually starts to introduce more girls into gaming, then perhaps we will outnumber our male counterparts. So thank you once again, **Edge**, for drawing attention to the situation and giving us courageous game-loving women some much-needed attention.

Keza MacDonald (sole female reviewer, www.madgamers.net)

While I heartily support the gratuitous use of bikini-clad crotches to grab the attention in most walks of life, the positioning of just such an image on the front cover of last month's **Edge** came as something of a shock. Not least to the till girl at a newsagents at Leicester train station, who did a double take and then felt obliged to conceal the magazine within the censorial folds of the local newspaper I had also purchased.

I felt like telling her that it was probably meant as an ironic comment on the state of the industry, especially when counterpointed with the serious discussions on women and gaming contained inside. Instead, I accepted her kind offer of a bag, and slunk out of the shop consoled at least by the presence of the Biffomeister within your pages.

Andrew Merrington

From the first time I picked up a new copy of **Edge** five years ago, I have not hesitated to take it to the counter. Today, seeing **E**121 on the shelf, I did something different – I put it back. Though **Edge** has never been perfect, I've always considered it the most well-argued, independent and intelligent videogame magazine on the market. But with the self-declared girl issue, that opinion has changed. I am amazed that a title which rightly criticises the blatant use of sex to sell products in the games industry could so openly use that same tactic. How else do you explain a cover page which centres on a digitised female groin?

Although gaming has never been an entirely fashionable occupation I have never felt the need to hide each issue when reading in public, but even flicking through your latest edition in the store made me feel sadder than anyone reaching for the top row. The subject of women in games is one which does need looking at, but to devote a whole magazine to that subject while at the same time exploiting the female form is both unnecessary, hypocritical and reeks of double standards. The truth is that the standard of your magazine has been dropping for some time now but I had faith that it would return to at least half the quality it once was. Today **Edge** lost a reader and I don't see any immediate reason to come back.

Lee Hyde, Essex

Not even to see your letter in print? Last issue's cover generated a heated response on the part of a minority of our readers. While **Edge** can only apologise for any offence caused, it's a shame that regular readers failed to appreciate the context of the cover image, or its ironic undertones, or even the obvious fact that the issue in question contained a review of Tecmo's *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball* – a title that throws up some intriguing questions about issues surrounding girl gaming and from which the cover image was drawn. Certainly, to accuse the magazine of using sex to sell copies is simply absurd; had that been the case it would have been necessary to use an image that was less innocuous, relatively speaking, than a girl in a bikini if the publication was to stand out from the acres of naked flesh on the average news-stand.

Perhaps it's worth a reminder, though, that **Edge** isn't aimed at everyone, and we expect our readers not to accept things – even the cover of the magazine – at face value.

For the record, of those females featured last issue who could be contacted as the current issue goes to press, the responses to the cover range from neutral to enthusiastic, but there were no complaints that the image was demeaning to women.

I have just finished reading your interview with Jeff Minter and I have to say that it was an extremely disappointing article indeed. Why waste ten pages on a project that hasn't even started? Everybody knows that the guy is a genius, but from what you're saying Unity is so far nothing more than a screen saver running at 60Hz. I'm really glad that in three months he managed to get to know the hardware of the GameCube, but I have seen no sign of a proper game yet. He still doesn't know whether we'll be driving (or be embodied in – as he says) a spaceship or what the game is about. He wants to blend music lightshows and a shoot'em up?

> "Hidden behind the male-orientated advertising efforts, trade-shows and magazines, there is a dedicated faction of female gamers who put up with it all for the love of gaming"



E121's cover divided opinion. Accusations that it was Edge's bid to test whether sex sells are entirely baseless, however. That would have been too easy

Fantastic, but nobody can tell at this stage whether Lionhead will even publish whatever he will produce. A lot of times, **Edge** quite rightfully blames the industry for being saturated with hopeless sequels and boring games, but then, instead of promoting new development teams or bedroom coders who will never make it without visibility from the press, you give space to someone like Mr Minter who doesn't really need much help to publicise any of his projects. And who doesn't have anything worth talking about at this stage.
Simone Doneda

Mr Minter needs as much help as anyone to publicise his projects, and as one of the most potentially interesting titles that **Edge** has come across recently, we decided that the game merited the coverage that it did precisely to inspire other bedroom coders and new development teams.

Steven Poole's article about murder simulators made me seriously reflect upon the whole aspect of killing in videogames. There is no denying that killing has always been an extremely large part of videogames, whether through the cartoonish type of killing in games like *Super Mario* or the more violent deaths in the *Grand Theft Auto* series.

The aspect that I find interesting however is our acceptence of killing and murder as a legitimate form of entertainment. That the killing in *Super Mario* is morally much less questionably due to its graphical nature is understandable, but recent games such as *Hitman 2*, where killing is extremely explicit and personal, is still viewed, by most, as good entertainment.

So let's do a thought experiment - take the game *Hitman 2*. Same game, same mechanics, same graphics but instead of your final objective being the assassination of your target, you are instead supposed to enter various locations, find your target and then rape her; leaving her gagged, and then sneaking out totally unnoticed. Still think it's a good game? I guess most of you can imagine the kind of outraged news headlines that such a game would produce. But the question is why? Is strangling a defenceless person with a fibrewire less of an offence than raping them; less of an intrusion of human rights, of what we consider right and wrong?

So my question is 'why is one entertainment and the other one is not'?
Jesper Koefoed, Sweden

Help! I think I've slipped into a parallel universe, or something. As a game player and bedroom coder who remembers with much fondness the 8bit 'home micro' days, I greatly appreciated your '**Edge** presents: **Retro**' magazines. However, I've begun to suspect that my memory has been wiped and replaced with recollections of events which never actually happened.

Y'see, I was under the misguided impression that during those heady days, the Speccy and C64 were the pioneers of video gaming, while the BBC Model B was the 'sensible' computer that schools and kids who wore Clarks shoes (not trainers) used to play with.

Apparently not. In the two recent **Retro** editions, the 'game reviews' at the back of the first issues, and 'The making of...' articles throughout the second both focused on more BBC Model B games than C64. Now granted, *Elite* was indeed a classic game – and rightly deserves a mention – but *Repton*? *Exile*? (Who?).

I can only assume that (a) I have indeed fallen into a parallel universe, in which kids in sensible shoes ruled the 1980s, or (b) You're holding back on all the innovative C64 games for a special C64-only **Retro** edition, or (c) The editor of **Retro** woke up on Christmas day 1983 to discover to his horror a BBC Model B under the tree, not the expected C64, and so began his slow and uncontrollable slide into a pathological hatred of all things Commodore?
Steve Austin

Assuming **Edge** hasn't fallen into an alternate universe in which the Six Million Dollar Man is a Commodore fan, it's true that Commodore was a giant in terms of home computing during the 80s and 90s and **Edge** has reflected this in several features over the years (**E**8, **E**23, **E**69, **E**100). However, C64 fans will have more to look forward to in the near future...

How many games have been nearly great, and then totally ruined by just a few small touches? Why is this allowed to happen, when frequently very simple changes could make all the difference? I suspect testers only look for bugs; may I suggest that towards the end of the dev cycle gameplay testers who are not close to the project are used, to look for playability issues.
Richard Bacon

The first thing I want to do is separate sexism in videogames (a bad thing, probably) from the issue of what women actually want from videogames; which is what I want to address. Right, where the hell were all these women before uncle Sony came along and made gaming cool? Where are all the thirty-something women who spent their evenings poking ADSR waveforms out of C64s in the '80s? Are there any Jennifer Minters, Davina Brabens, Toni Crowthers etc? Of course there aren't. The fact is ladies, that you didn't pay your dues. You can't turn your nose up at a pastime, label it 'sad', then bitch about it twenty years later because it's evolved into something you don't like. You only get out what you put in, and with some *very* honourable exceptions, women have given us jack, bar some rather delightful inspiration.

It must really sting that now gaming's cool, women's indifference allowed gaming to evolve into a male pursuit thereby buggering it up for today's young women. Girl Power!
Roland Casewell

Erm, this is a joke, right?

"The Speccy and C64 were the pioneers of video gaming while the BBC Model B was the sensible computer that schools and kids who wore Clarks shoes used to play with"

from the forum

A selection of choice cuts from Edge-Online's discussion outlet (http://forum.edge-online.com)

Subject: **Be quoted in the Sunday Times**
Poster: **Steven Poole**
I am writing a feature for the aforesaid periodical about the interesting 'new' phenomenon of online console gaming. Unusually, the editor is demanding that my cogitations be liberally sprinkled with comments from 'real gamers' (™), so where else to solicit thoughtful and interesting comments than this forum? The kinds of questions he wants testimonials on are:
1) How does playing *UT* or *Ghost Recon* etc online differ from playing a four-way fragger or shooter round the same TV? Do some games that are quite dull or just very familiar suddenly become novel and exciting again in an online context?
2) To any *EverQuest* or other MMRPG players: is the 'virtual economy' of such games experientially similar to that of a real economy? Is the winning of money and status a major attraction here?
3) What does voice add to the Live experience? Do some people abuse it?
4) Do people tend to 'make friends' in the Live environment, or generally stick with people they already know?
There you go. Any replies gratefully considered for inclusion in the article and subsequent fame and fortune (except for the fortune).

Poster: **empy-c**
There's something about playing online which is just so much more rewarding than four people sitting around a console. There are the obvious advantages of co-players not being able to see what you are up to (in an FPS for example). But it's the feeling that you're plugged into your own little world trying to prove yourself against gamers around the globe that really makes it feel special.

I was quite sceptical about the Voice Communicator idea when I first heard about it but I can genuinely say it enhances the experience, especially with a game like *Ghost Recon* where communication between team members is vital. Imagine trying to do this using a keyboard. It's quite simple: it wouldn't work.

I've made friends in the Live environment. You're all there for the gaming experience so you already have something in common. I consider it to be another social group, like the forum is. Many would see this as sad, I don't. It's just different

Poster: **The Boatman**
I think that not having your teammates or opponents in the same room with you increases your immersion in the game so that you interact more with their digital personae, rather than their actual selves. Which is a fancy way of saying that you can't see their screens so that you don't know what they're up to. Also, being thrown into a firefight with guys you don't know gives the impression of being in a newly-recruited squad where you're still a bit wary of comrades' abilities.

On *GR*, you can mute people who are annoying you, or eject them from the game if you're the host. On *UC*, you can usually change to a different channel, so I haven't found abuse to be much of a problem. But its benefits are considerable.

Poster: **Kyoshiro**
Having played *Ultima Online* for over a year the way I see it is that the virtual economy functions pretty much like any 'real' economy, with the *UO* gold overtaking some real currencies in value. When I last played, a million gold pieces was worth about £10-20 on eBay, and houses or accounts can fetch far more. In fact there was a small side column in PC Gamer on how a *UO* player quit his real job as he was making money from buying and selling virtual houses. Money can be a major attraction in *UO*. Others, like me, prefer to go for adventuring and gaining better characters, while some I know prefer to have the biggest house to display their wealth and collection of rare items. The relationship between virtual money and real money is taken one step further in a new MMRPG *Project Entropia*, which will be free to play but uses real money for all transactions. This is debited directly from your bank account, with a small percentage going to the developers of the game.

Poster: **Farsight**
Surpisingly, the experience is much different than I thought it would be. Sitting around a TV with a group of friends is akin to an experience like playing pool. It's a party-like environment and, while competitive, it's never too serious. Online however things can get more intense. Sitting with a whole screen to yourself, and in contact with strangers by keyboard or voice, you're out to prove yourself to the world. In team games particularly, such as *Unreal Tournament 2003*, I have felt my heart thumping, and experienced a genuine sense of anxiety. Why? Because if I fail, I will have let my team down. If I get picked off moments from scoring, I've wasted that opportunity, and I'm open to mockery by strangers. You simply don't get this experience with mates (where it doesn't really matter) or when playing against mechanical AI. Playing dirty online also has a dramatic effect on me. If someone plays a dirty trick on me, my blood boils in the same way it would on a real pitch. And I'll go all out to get revenge on the other player.

Voice adds a lot to the experience. Whereas typing can be laborious, limiting chat to game-essential statements, voice allows conversations to be going on all the time. Not only can players instantly relay commands, plans or whatever to each other, they can sit back and chat with fellow gamers as if they were in the same room. It adds a much more social element to the experience. For example, in *MotoGP*, without voice I would have to sit and try my best to win, racing lap after lap, and I would be very disappointed when or if I lost. In fact considering the skill level of many players online I'd probably be turned off playing altogether.

Do some people abuse it? Yes, unfortunately, although, in my experience, these have been thankfully in the minority. One game of *Mech Assault* I played was full of Americans and from the instant the game started they whooped and hollered abuse into their mics. When one player was found to have a Canadian accent, he was instantly pounced upon, verbally and in the game,

"Playing online has a dramatic effect on me. If someone plays a dirty trick on me, my blood boils and I'll go all out to get revenge on the other player"





Inspired by *Animal Crossing*, The Goat Keeper wonders if you could fiddle with the GameCube's internal clock to create a feasible time travelling game. And *Super Mario 64*? Miles better than *Super Mario Sunshine* reckons spacedog et al

receiving a tirade of comments about him based on his nationality. Meanwhile, I kept silent, dreading to think what they'd make of a Scottish accent.

Subject: **Using the *Animal Crossing* engine to make a time travel game**
Poster: **The Goat Keeper**
Imagine an RPG or similar where you had to time-travel, using some of the ideas in *Animal Crossing* (you can effectively time travel within that game you see, by fiddling the internal clock).

As an example, after completing a section of the game in the year 2003, you'd get an instruction to save, and adjust the GameCube clock accordingly, to continue your adventure in the past or future!

Poster: **Thraktor**
While I doubt Nintendo would make a game that encourages you to switch the internal clock on your GameCube every time you play, the idea of *Animal Crossing* and time travel does raise some interesting points. I'd love to see a game where you were given an environment – much as in *Animal Crossing* except bigger – in which all advancement is done by travelling forward and backwards in time, year by year. While the entire environment would be available to you from the start, your ability to go backwards and forwards in time would increase as you play. Using well designed AI and programming, anything you do, from killing the mayor to chopping down a small tree, would have its effects on the future of a game. This means that, when facing a problem, you'd have a huge variety of ways to get around it.

Poster: **JedEvangelion**
Anyone remember *Shadow of Memories*? It was the closest thing I can recall to a true 'time travel' game, and it was, for the most part, completely incomprehensible: instant deaths that made no sense, but that happened (supposedly) because of actions you'd taken in the past. On reflection, I think that's what a time travel game would be like. It would, by the very nature of what it's trying to portray, end up as a chaotic mess.

I can see how that aspect of it would be excusable in a sandbox mode, but completely unmanageable in a story-driven narrative. Ray Bradbury's 'A Sound of Thunder' provides a compellingly believable scenario of how one, tiny change in the past (in this case a hunter stepping on a butterfly) can cascade through time to completely transform history.

On reflection, portraying that in a sandbox mode could be immensely entertaining in it's own right. Exploring the possibilities, and the consequences, could be very interesting. Maybe a simple loose objective, such as 'stop the end of the world' (simple? How f***ed up is that?) could be all the narrative drive a 'game' like that would need. Hmmm. Something's just changed because now I want to go back and play *Shadow of Memories* again. Scary.

Subject: **Mario 64, still the best**
Poster: **spacedog**
Picked up this little gem the other day in my local branch of CEX. I have to say, I thought it was sublime way back in 1997 when I bought it with my N64. And now? Well, my opinion of it really hasn't changed at all. It is still a clever, accomplished, delightful genius of a game that oozes class in every department. And it is an absolute joy to play. My task this time round is to get all 120 stars. I came some way short last time with only 90.

Poster: **more heat than light**
I was so disappointed when I got *Mario Sunshine*. It hasn't got the same addictive quality that *64* had. Plus, it had twice as many levels (just wait until you get to Tall Tall Mountain. Aaaaaagh!!!). After I finished *Sunshine*, I never played it again. I'm only on 72 shines! I didn't stop *Mario 64* until I got all 120 stars.

Poster: **Jim Miles**
Yeah, and the blue coin shines in *Mario Sunshine* just felt SO lazy. I had great fun exploring the levels aimlessly in *Mario 64*, so why did they have to force me to do it in *Mario Sunshine*?

Subject: **What's the last game that made you laugh?**
Poster: **Molloy**
Humour is curiously absent from most games but now and then one comes along that tickles the funny bone. I find *Gitaroo Man* endlessly amusing. There aren't any stand-out good lines but the whole game has this odd charm and the voice acting is really, really good. *Vice City* also had some very welcome light humour. My favourite was when Tommy and Lance nick some cop uniforms:

Lance: Ahh! Fits perfectly
Tommy: Bit tight around the crotch though
Lance: Yeah, mine too, mine too

Poster: **paragonasiadataflow**
I thought at the end of *Splinter Cell*, where Sam Fisher's daughter says, "You haven't laughed that hard at the news since Reagan was president", was a nice in-joke.

Poster: **Shoes**
Animal Crossing, of course! Kapp'n's songs make me laugh sometimes, as do most of the other town people. Surprisingly well written dialogue.

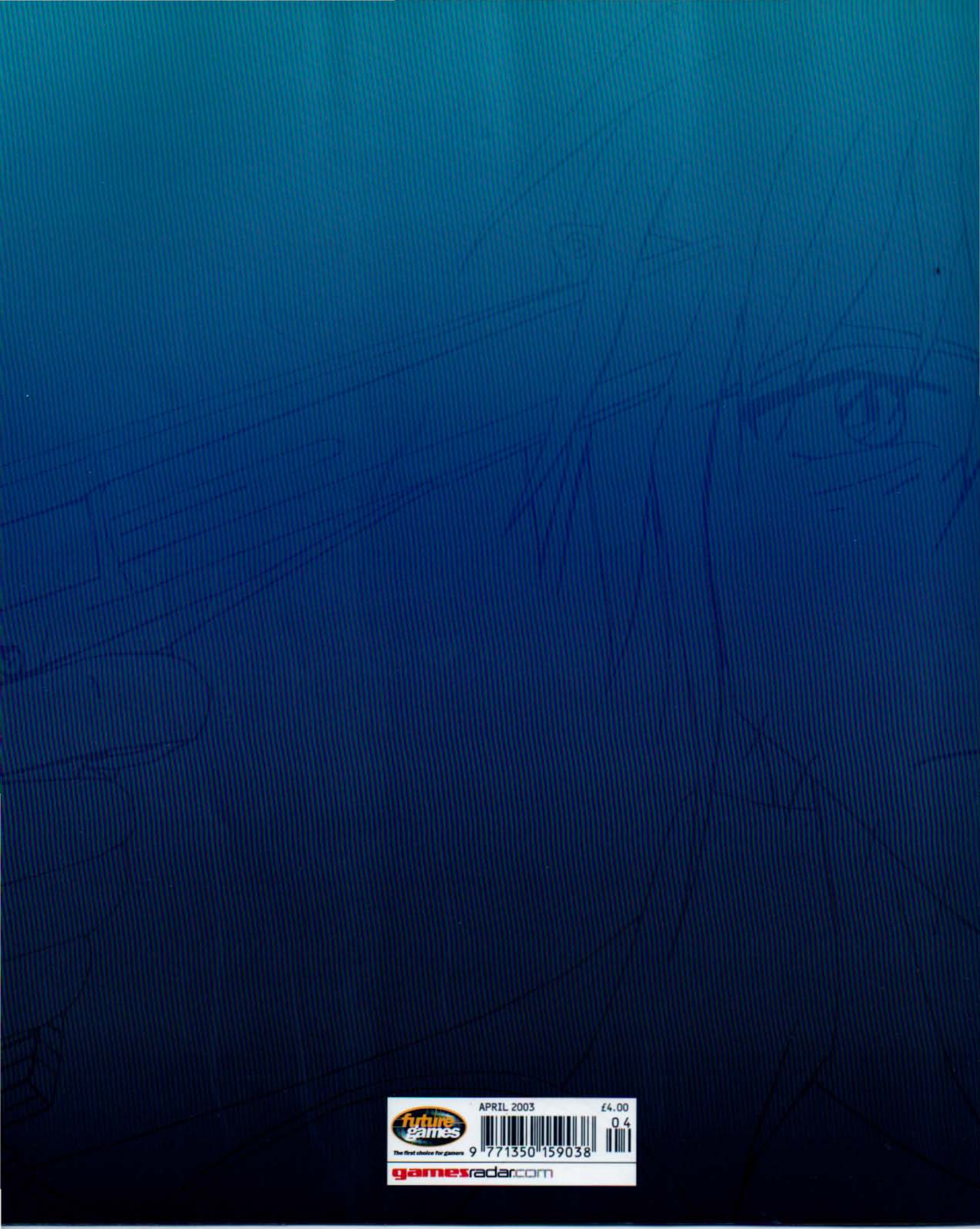
Poster: **Flojomojo**
Funny dialogue in games is rare now, if not extinct. That's okay with me though, since the medium is capable of delivering far more than one-liners. *Space Channel 5* does it for me when played with the original Japanese voices, even though I don't understand what they're saying. The first time you get your posse to strut behind you is pure gold. The Asteroid Chase with bongos and go-go dancers is terrific, as is Space Michael Jackson. Hoo!

"I'd love to see a game where you were given an environment in which all advancement is done by travelling forward and backwards in time, year by year"



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